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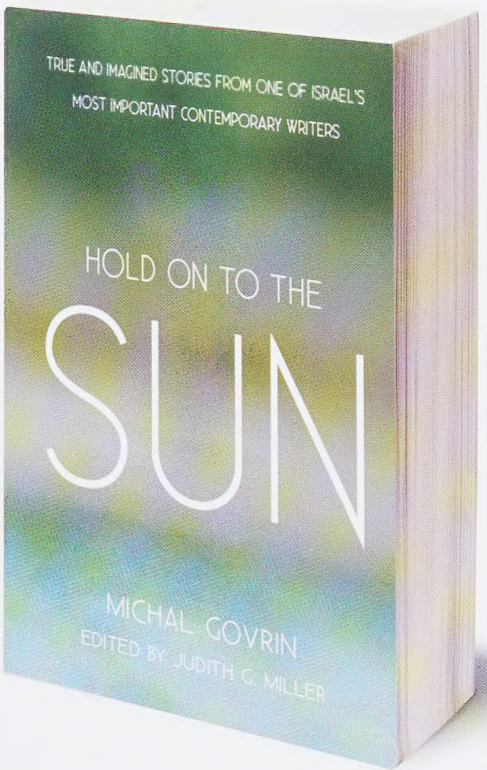
TRUE AND IMAGINED STORIES FROM ONE OF ISRAEL'S MOST IMPORTANT CONTEMPORARY WRITERS
HOLD ON TO THE
SUN
MICHAL GOVRIN
EDITED BY JUDITH G. MILLER

HOLD ON TO THE SUN
MICHAL GOVRIN
Edited by Judith G. Miller

In this portrait of the artist as a young woman, Michal Govrin, one of Israel's most important contemporary writers, offers a kaleidoscope of stories and essays. Populated by mysterious and real people, each tale is in some way a search for meaning in a post-Holocaust world. Essays describe Govrin's visits to Poland as a young adult, where her mother survived a death camp but lost her first husband and child. In a multiplicity of voices, Govrin's haunting stories capture the depths of denial and the exuberance of youth.

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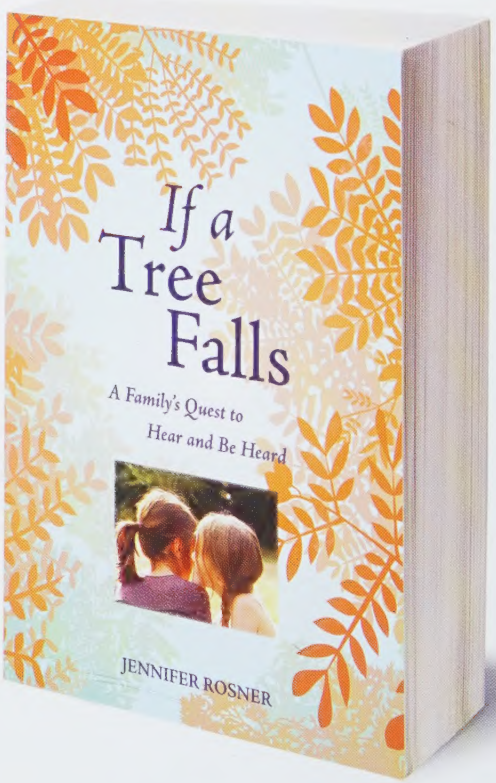

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JENNIFER ROSNER

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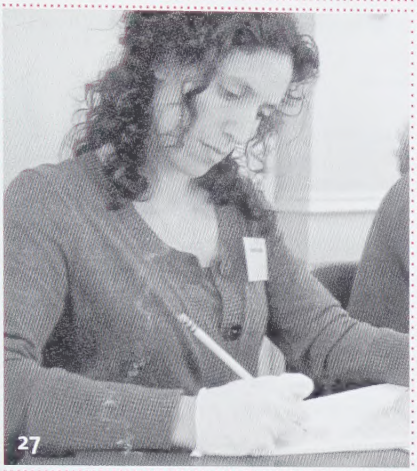
Lilith

summer 2010
vol. 35, no. 2

In the Garden of Eden, long before the eating of the apple, the Holy One created the first human beings—a man, Adam, and a woman, Lilith. Lilith said, "We are equal because we are created from the same earth."

Alphabet of Ben Sira, 23a-b



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Special fiction section is made possible in part with the support of the New York State Council on the Arts.

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"Money is the bio-fuel that makes change possible." —Nessa Rapoport

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Washington. It's a bumpy ride for watching news unfold—bad, good, and bad again.

The feel-good Jewish gathering at the White House in May, on an otherwise pleasant, and even progressive afternoon, unintentionally drew some awful news: a rabbi covering the event for his news blog happened to spot on the lawn then-columnist Helen Thomas (not an invitee), who spewed forth her revolting comments about Jews and Israel. Thomas's remarks sounded like creepily familiar Jew-hatred ("Jews should get out of Israel and go back to where they came from: Poland, Germany…"). As you likely know, she has since resigned her press positions.

This ugliness, which surfaced a week later on YouTube, had no impact on the formal White House event, created to celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month. The reception was, in fact, a delightful sea change in the Jewish world, and could have been entitled Not the Usual Suspects.

When I received my invitation to the gathering, I admit that my first thought was that this was going to be just another Jewish convention with hundreds—maybe thousands—of people, all known to one another, representing the presidents of this and

A slight "We're all at Sinai" vibe at the White House

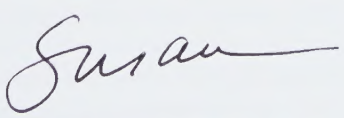
that Jewish organization, the heavy hitters, a careful balance of rabbis and the heads of Jewish academic institutions, boldfaced names from the organized Jewish community. My skepticism was only reinforced when I phoned in my RSVP to the White House office listed in the invitation and its automated outgoing message announced, "If you are calling to reply about Asian-American Heritage Month, press one. If you are calling for Jewish-American Heritage Month, press two…" Rolling my eyes, I pressed two, and over-enunciated my pertinent data into the machine.

But the gathering, small by the standards of Jewish conferences, foiled my cynicism. And that of others, too. People milling about in those East Wing rooms were overheard saying, again and again, "I can't believe I don't know more people here." This mix was decidedly unexpected, since no guest list of the 200 or so invitees was ever released. There was a slight we-are-all-at-Sinai vibe. Lots of women—though of course there should and could have been more. Youngish (under 40) Jewish activists of all stripes. Musicians. Scientists. Artists. Foodies. Sports figures (I was really challenged here, since there were—alas—no name tags, how was I supposed to know who those tall, tanned, fit and unfamiliar-looking people were?). Around every corner of the various lounges, with their huge paintings of presidents and first ladies, around every one of the several bars and kosher-meat-laden buffet tables, around the display cases with Jewish artifacts on loan from the Library of Congress and elsewhere, you were likely to spot people who looked vaguely familiar but who, out of context, it was tough to I.D.

My own (partial) list: Singer Debbie Friedman; Times columnist Tom Friedman (no relation, but they did go to Camp Herzl together in Minnesota, turns out); Carl Bernstein; Joan Nathan; Peggy Pearlstein, head of the Hebraic Section at the Library of Congress; JTA publisher Mark Joffe; Nancy Falchuk, president of Hadassah; pop vocalist Regina Spektor (who played and sang for us, and for the President and Michelle Obama); Rabbi Alyssa Stanton, the first African American woman rabbi, who declaimed Emma Lazarus's "The New Colossus" (you met Stanton in Lilith's pages); Sarah Lefton, creator of the weekly online cartoon series G-dCast (ditto); Al Franken; Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg; Rep. Nita Lowey of New York; Shawn Landres, of Jumpstart; writer Abigail Pogrebin; Heeb magazine editor Josh Neuman; Gail Reimer of the Jewish Women's Archive; Lou Cove, Executive Director of Reboot; Esther Safran Foer, who heads the hip, restored Sixth & I Synagogue in D.C.; Judy Blume; and Sandy Koufax, who was the undisputed star of the event. Oh, and did I mention Elana Kagan? The delightful diversity of ages and backgrounds and colors and talents and work lives indeed felt like a tribute.

But, Washington (and life) being what it is, my pleasure in this gathering was pretty short lived.

On the domestic front, this season the U.S. State Department released its report on T.I.P., the clumsy term for trafficking in persons, clearly a scourge not exclusive to other places, other times. Today, more people are being held as slaves than ever before, with slavery almost as profitable as the drug trade. Lilith's reports on this subject worldwide go back more than 10 years, and the grim statistics are getting grimmer, with allegations of slavery even in some diplomatic households in Washington. Watch upcoming issues of Lilith, and visit the Lilith website (Lilith.org) for more on what you can do about this—including understanding how demand (for diamonds, chocolate, domestic labor, exotic sex, the parts that go into our cell phones) fuels human trafficking. I was stunned, naively, to learn these unwelcome truths. You may be too.



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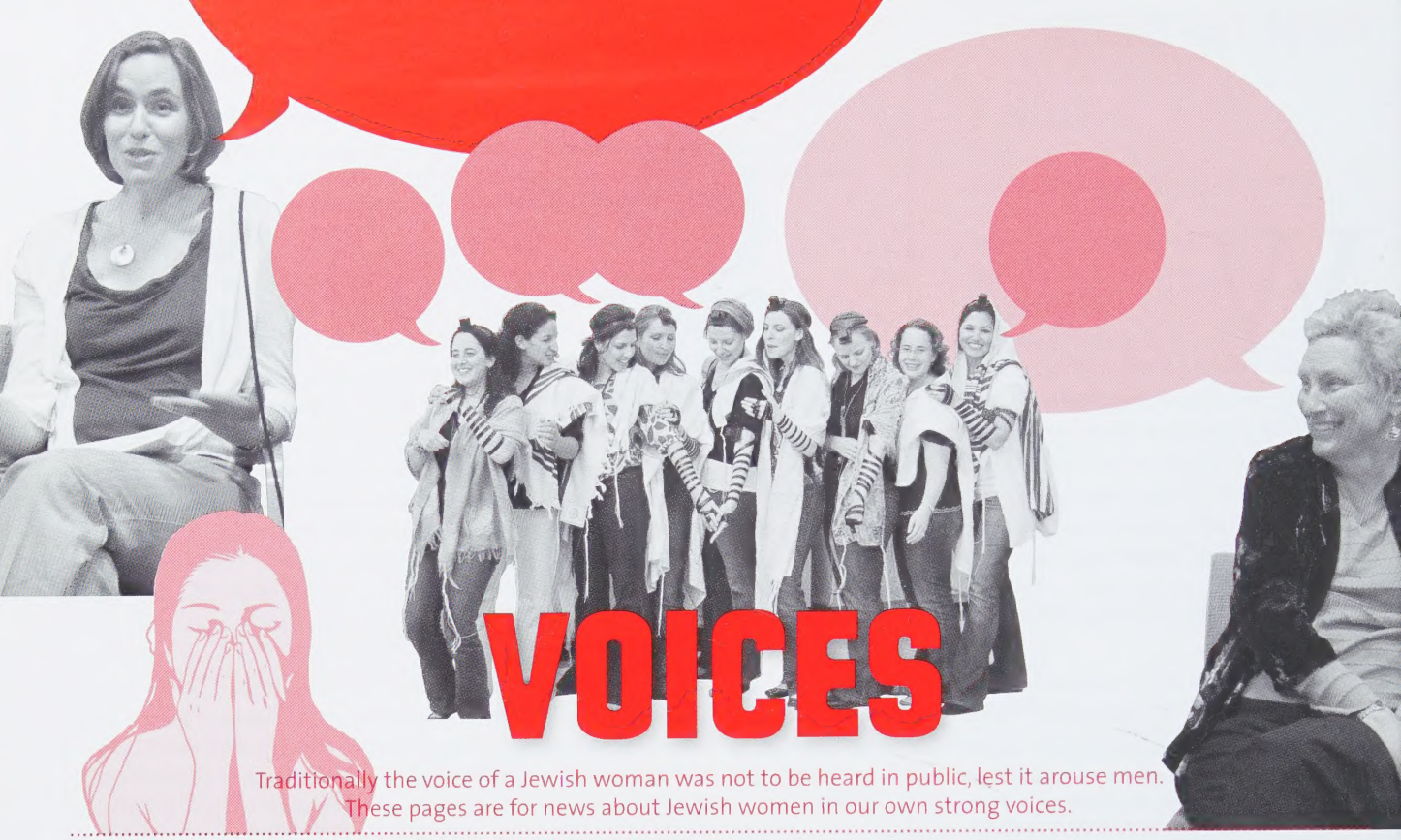


VOICES

Traditionally the voice of a Jewish woman was not to be heard in public, lest it arouse men. These pages are for news about Jewish women in our own strong voices.

Orthodox Women: On the Front Lines for Feminism

Nothing energizes like the fight for a good cause. Case in point: **Rabba Sara Hurwitz**, the living symbol of the fight to ordain women as Orthodox rabbis, got a standing ovation at the opening of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) annual conference in New York in March.

The newly created title "rabba," coined by activist rabbi **Avi Weiss**, was a step closer to "rabbi" for Hurwitz, a member of Weiss's rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale (N.Y.). The move ignited a firestorm in the American Orthodox world.

Hurwitz appeared at sessions throughout the JOFA conference, attended by more than a thousand women and a sprinkling of men. She told the conference plenary: "I stand here as an Orthodox woman who takes *halakha* (Jewish law) very seriously. The argument against having women in leadership is societal, not halakhic."

Six weeks later, with no reference to halakha, the Rabbinic Council of America, the mainstream Orthodox rabbinic organization, resolved: "We cannot accept either the ordination of women or the recognition of women as members of the Orthodox rabbinate, regardless of title." (The vote coincided with the 25th anniversary of Conservative Judaism's ordination of its first woman rabbi.)

While the rabbi issue sparked the major excitement at the JOFA conference, the gathering, chaired by **Audrey Axelrod Trachtman** with program co-chairs **Judy Abel** and **Allie Alperovich**, proved the dynamism of Orthodox feminism. Some 70 sessions ranged from quilting as prayer to protecting our daughters from becoming *agunot*—wives chained to husbands who refuse to give them a divorce under Jewish law.

JOFA President **Carol Kaufman Newman** quoted Blu Greenberg, founder of the organization in 1997, as not wanting to give offense but being told by a board member, "It's a revolution. You will have to offend someone." Broadening the agenda, Trachtman challenged participants to examine "how social justice fits into JOFA's struggles," with "responsibility to join the world community in the fight against AIDS and malnutrition ... to consider these issues within the context of Orthodoxy." As for the rabba issue, Trachtman said, "We cannot be intimidated. The long-term movement is undeniably forward."

And then there were conference surprises. Lawyer and researcher **Viva Hammer** documented that financially comfortable Orthodox women are choosing to have more children than their mothers, in some cases in opposition to their husbands. In a study of more than 70 women, Hammer found that women are choosing to serve God in the way only a woman can—dedicating their bodies to "unlimited, uncontrolled conception." They think of this, said Hammer, as "their 'avoda.' Their sacrifice, their prayer to God."

Contrast this with "Shira," one of the Israeli films shown at the conference film festival. A young mother is brought to a state of mental and physical collapse by a husband who insists on endless childbearing in the pursuit of a son. One man's response: "If the husband thinks it's halakha, he's wrong."

AMY STONE

Looking Up—New Art On The Hospital's Ceiling

They were born almost the same week, **Nehama Grenimann** and **Timora Avitzur**. Friends from the time they were babies. Daughters of English-speaking parents who belong to Kehilat Yedidya, Jerusalem's first left-liberal Orthodox congregation. They grew up together in a close-knit community that was intellectually, politically and socially involved. At the age of four or five, they produced their first book: Timora's text, Nehama's illustrations. In high school—both of them smart, sensitive, talented students—they compared notes and dreams. But Timora died at 18, after six grueling years of hospital treatments for leukemia. She left behind a sheaf of poems and a grieving community. Nehama went on to serve in the Israeli army, then to study art in Florence. Her experiences with Timora still very fresh, she wrote her senior thesis on "Hospitals, Giving, and the Social Role of Art."

It was no coincidence, then, that Nehama Grenimann's first big project, back at home in Jerusalem after her wedding in 2009, was an art exhibition dedicated to Timora; it opened in April at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem (Ein Karem). No ordinary exhibit,

Nehama Grenimann

this: the 10 artists, all women, created and donated their works specifically for the ceiling of Hadassah's Intensive Care Unit, to be seen by patients during those critical moments when they emerge from operating rooms and anesthesia and begin their recovery. It was certainly no coincidence, either, that this was very much a women's project. Born of Nehama's desire to commemorate Timora's life, the idea for the show came from **Ann (Chana) Cromer**, one of the several artists represented who belong to Kehilat Yedidya (which, incidentally, is probably the only synagogue in Israel whose main prayer hall also serves as a gallery for contemporary art). As curator, Nehama studied the Intensive Care Unit—doctors, nurses, and patients—to determine how the project could best serve the department. She raised funds, recruited more artists, and connected with Hadassah and hospital staff, particularly the nurses on the ward, all women.

"Timora was supportive of me from the age of four," Nehama recalls. "She was the person who pushed me to do art, to want to change things. That's where this project started. I wanted to give something to the hospital. Like it or not, it's part of our lives and our community."

The head nurse of the Intensive Care Unit, **Dvora Moria**, added on behalf of the hospital staff: "Nurses, unlike the society around us, are not money-oriented. We choose nursing because of its values: giving, taking care of people's souls as well as their bodies." The commemorative project began in friendship and creativity culminated in 10 original works of ceiling art to cheer needy souls and bodies.

BARBARA GINGOLD

First woman to head a major Jewish Federation!

Jennifer Gorovitz, acting CEO of the San Francisco-based Jewish Community Federation, is "acting" no longer. Gorovitz, 46, was named CEO in May, becoming the first woman to head one of North America's 20 largest Jewish federations. Gorovitz said: "It's a wonderful feel-good moment for the staffs of [North American] federations, 75 percent of whom are women. I hope they'll feel empowered."

from JWeekly.com, March 20, 2010

Women's economic autonomy is an urgent safety issue: "Domestic violence is often addressed with advocacy initiatives that primarily focus on the provision of services to victims and survivors. By using public policy to improve women's economic status, we can help eradicate one of the largest underlying reasons that violence against women persists: lack of financial security. No woman should have to choose between personal safety and economic stability for herself and her children."

from "Higher Ground," NCJW's effort to end domestic violence by strengthening the economic status of women. ncjw.org/higherground

Ezrat Nashim: Mothers of Invention and Revolution

No better day than Mother's Day to reunite the band of women who led the fight for equal rights for women in the Jewish religious world in the 1970s.

Nine of the early leaders of the germinal Jewish feminist group Ezrat Nashim (translated as "Help of Women," the name for the women's section in traditional synagogues) spoke at the Manhattan JCC this May, along with one daughter of the revolution.

A brief recap: In March 1972, fueled by the Vietnam War protests and the "click" of feminist consciousness, two carloads of women from the New York Havurah arrived uninvited at Conservative Judaism's Rabbinical Assembly at the Concord Resort Hotel in the Catskills. Their call for halakhic change within Conservative Judaism made it into the assembly materials: that women be allowed individual memberships in synagogues, count in the minyan, be witnesses in Jewish law, initiate divorce, have equality with men in rabbinic and cantorial schools and in synagogues, assume professional leadership roles, and fulfill all mitzvot equally with men.

As **Paula Hyman**, now professor of Modern Jewish History at Yale, put it, "That notion of achieving anything you want came from the '60s, and we were children of the '60s. ... We were the right people at the right time. What we were saying made sense."

Change came relatively fast, with the Jewish Theological Seminary admitting the first women rabbinical students in 1984. And the women spurring the change have gone on to shape our world in many ways: **Judith Plaskow**, author of the landmark book *Standing Again at Sinai* (this time women get counted) now professor of religious studies, Manhattan College; **Martha Ackelsberg**, professor of government and women's studies at Smith; **Dina Rosenfeld** of NYU Silver School of Social Work; **Rabbi Judith Hauptman,** who was unable to attend the event, professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological seminary; **Elizabeth Koltun**, editor of *The Jewish Woman* anthology (first published in 1973), followed by a career as a lawyer. **Arlene Agus** advises the Jewish Child Care Association; **Leora Fishman** is a physician; **Eva Fogeleman** is a psychologist active in the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance; **Maureen McCleod** retired as a family court judge.

At this year's retelling, organized by JCC staffer **Rabbi Carol Levithan**, **Judith Hyman Rosenbaum,** the one second-generation Jewish feminist on the program, framed today's issues. For Rosenbaum, director of public history at the Jewish Women's Archive in Brookline, Mass., these include not just the issue of wages for the senior woman rabbi but also the wages of synagogue custodians and the immigrant woman the rabbi relies on at home. LGBT issues (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trangender) are also, in Rosenbaum's words, "a major challenge in a good way—exploding the gender binary at the heart of Judaism."

Paula Hyman and Judith Hyman Rosenbaum

AMY STONE

To contribute Ezrat Nashim archival material, contact Martha Ackelsberg, Dept. of Government, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063.

Letter from Jerusalem

Listening in on the next generation of Conservative women rabbis

When a group of women rabbinical students studying in Israel gathered in Jerusalem living rooms this past year, one of our diverse discussion topics was how we see ourselves, and how we are seen.

My hevruta (study partner) **Kerrith Solomon** and I convened this group of women from the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Ziegler school so we could talk with our peers about things we have not yet had safe space to explore within our schooling, reclaiming and exploring our identities as women on our paths toward the rabbinate in the Conservative Movement.

For my first two years in rabbinical school, I felt pressure to be both a Jewish man and a Jewish woman. I accepted the full gamut of ritual obligation, but never had any conversation around integrating my gender identity into the role of rabbi. With the guidance of our teacher, Rabbi Miriam Berkowitz, our group began that process. We ventured back into traditional sources and examined our own emotions around topics such as niddah (laws regulating physical contact between a woman and her husband during her period and the days after), mikveh and head covering.

One Wednesday evening, over lentil stew, we spent time on questions of feeling authentic, about perceptions of what a rabbi "looks like," about dreams of becoming pregnant or raising families, and concerns about how that might impact our careers.

"How big do you want to be?" Aderet Okon Drucker was asked by a mentoring rabbi when she sought advice about which internships and jobs to pursue as she begins her rabbinic career.

"How big do you want to be?" What does it mean to want to be big? What sacrifices will we have to make in order to make room for our influence to grow? Are we allowed to not want to be big? We discovered we were annoyed with the go-to definition of "big" and the culture of comparing congregation size—A, B, C, D—that we have heard permeates rabbis' gatherings. I joked that mine would be a Double D, if only there were a correlation between shul size and bra size.

One woman redefined big as an integrated identity that allows you to be your many selves as a rabbi, partner, parent, friend, sister, daughter and person. Being big would mean having a sense of self that could hold and weave together many facets of life beyond the professional realm.

We spoke of hopes that our generation can redefine rabbinic identity in this way, taking some of the pressure off of the expectations of unyielding self-sacrifice placed on the rabbi. Our vision of the rabbinate would involve a makeover of communal expectations, in which it would be acceptable and encouraged for clergy to have time and life outside of the pulpit, office, etc. We see benefit in this for rabbis-to-be and rabbis-that-are of all genders.

If this is what it means to be big, I would like to super-size my rabbinate.

ANNIE LEWIS

For more on what this particular subset of next- generation rabbis is talking about, stay tuned on The Lilith Blog. They're going to be posting regularly at Lilith.org/blog. They are also working on a photography project to expand the images of what a rabbi looks like.

Profiled in Lilith's spring issue, **Judy Shotten**, a pioneering mental health professional in Israel, where she has lived since 1947, wrote to correct, modestly, some misperceptions: "I was not the 'first qualified social worker' in Israel. There were others who had academic degrees in social work in those years. In the 1940s, prior to the War of Independence, there was a non-academic course which trained people to do social work in Palestine. And I did not 'create' the first mental health clinic at the Histadrut. It was set up by **Dr. Franz Brill**, a marvelous psychiatrist. I was one of the first professionals to be hired to work there, but I did not initiate the project."

You can hear **Anne Etra** perform her "*get* rap," about the inequities of Jewish divorce, at thegetrap.com

Introducing Sweden's Stellar Jewish Feminist Writer

"When I was a young girl I slept for six months with my feet on my pillow like Pippi Longstocking, I made my mother read her books to me every night until her voice became hoarse," recalls **Rose Lagercrantz** (pictured), a Swedish author best known for her novels for young readers. Lilith caught up with her recently at a friend's bar mitzvah in Nice.

Lagercrantz, whose fiction is excerpted in the anthology *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Sweden*, says her identification with the Jewish community came belatedly. "The Swedes were better than the Swedish Jews at welcoming Holocaust survivors [like my parents] to Sweden," she laments.

Lagercrantz's father was born in Germany and found his way to safety in Sweden. Twenty years older than the Transylvanian woman he married, he had made up his mind even before meeting her that he was going to marry a concentration camp survivor. Lagercrantz says she probably became a writer because her mother was constantly saying to her, "don't tell—don't speak about this." Though for many years her parents did not talk about their Holocaust experiences, she felt as though she "always knew everything." Her first novel, *Tulia's Summer*, was about a girl who wanted her parents to get a divorce. "It has the 'unhappy' ending of her parents staying together," she notes dryly.

Not long before he died at 98, Lagercrantz's father recorded his story in 27 tapes. Lagercrantz's novel *The Girl Who Didn't Want to Kiss* is based on her father's love for a young woman who gave him the false passport and forged letter of employment that saved his life, while she herself perished at the hands of the Nazis.

Beginning many novels is a declaration that any resemblance to real people is entirely unintentional. "In my case," Lagercrantz declares, "it should be just the opposite. If anything here is not true to the facts, it's by mistake." One of Lagercrantz's novels for adults, *Adeline*, is based on the life of her cousin whom others thought a difficult and even monstrous person but whom she loved. "She would explain things to me, and I am always seduced by explanation."

Why does she write for young readers? She says it is to give herself the happy childhood she never had; hence her love for Pippi Longstocking. (In 1980 Lagercrantz won an award that was handed to her by **Astrid Lindgren** herself; she is also the winnner of the August (Strindberg) Prize.)

In addition to books, Lagercrantz has written radio plays featuring monologues by women. In one, "In Praise of the Impossible," Snow White enjoys telling people how, after a life with seven little men... "Who wants to hear a story about life with one little man after the other? Only number eight, when she is already sick with despair, almost dead, shakes her to life with the right questions and gets her on her feet again." Lagercrantz has Little Red Riding Hood as a peace activist, Cinderella's step-sisters protesting the tyranny of a fashion fetish for small feet, and Sleeping Beauty claiming that being with a man, any man, causes women to seem to go through life as if they are asleep.

Lagercrantz's novel *The Ophelia Etudes* makes the case that Ophelia is not crazy and did not commit suicide. Since its publication, every Swedish production of Hamlet adds a stage direction where Ophelia clutches her pregnant belly onstage. This has not caught on overseas, however, perhaps because the book has not been translated from Swedish. "When you are a Swedish writer," Lagercrantz says, "you are closed in a jail of language."

NAOMI DANIS

Singing Together for Pleasure and Peace

One of Israel's most popular vocal artists, **Noa** appeared at New York's 92nd Street Y in April as part of an eight-city U.S. tour—a homecoming of sorts for the singer known in Israel by her full name, Achinoam Nini. Born in 1969 to a Yemenite Israeli family, Noa lived in New York from two until 17. She returned to her native Israel to join the entertainment unit of the Israeli army, met her long-time music partner and collaborator Gil Dor, and skyrocketed into popularity in Israel and Europe.

Noa's first album, "Achinoam Nini and Gil Dor Live" appeared in 1991. Her other albums include a recording with the Israel Philharmonic. She writes that "Now," her 2002 album, was written "under the influence of my pregnancy and birth [of my first child]." In 2009 came "Noa & Mira Awad—There Must Be Another Way." **Mira Awad**, an Israeli Palestinian, and Noa have been collaborating for about 10 years; it's an artistic meeting, but also a political one, as they strive to harness the power of music in the name of peace. The two appeared together at Eurovision 2009, stirring controversy among Jews and Israelis, Palestinians and Muslims. Awad was the first Palestinian to represent Israel at the annual music contest, and the first Arab ever to perform at Eurovision.

Noa's eclecticism extends beyond her musical styles, which range from folk to pop to Yemenite to jazz; she sings in English, Hebrew and Arabic and plays several instruments. She kept the evening lively with guitar, fast-paced drumming and a lyrical piano solo. She also utilized what is perhaps the world's most accessible and basic instrument, her body, in a rhythmic chestbone-and-hand percussive arrangement. She covered a variety of old favorites, including a new jazz arrangement of "Mishaela," as well as some newer material from her Yemenite-inflected album "Genes and Jeans" (2008).

The freshest part of the evening began about an hour in. While Noa and her accompanists took a break, Mira Awad took the stage for three solo songs in Arabic, including "Bahlawan" (Acrobat), which describes the constant balancing act of a woman in an Arab society and a Palestinian in a Jewish society. Then she and Noa per-

"Mikveh," from Israeli playwright **Hadar Galron** had its U.S. premier this season at Theater J in Washington D.C. The production, which has had long runs in Israel (in its original Hebrew) and in Mexico City (in Spanish), features women who end up at the ritual bath at the same time each month. Their personal secrets and the community's lies unravel bit by bit: the political leader who beats his wife, the mikveh attendant shamed by her daughter's defection to secularism, the young bride married off to the wrong guy, and more. The themes may sound like agitprop, but they lead to a hopeful climax: the women lock themselves into the mikveh, and finally feel their own power.

formed three songs together: their Eurovision entry, "There Must Be Another Way," "Will You Dance With Me" and a cover of "We Can Work it Out"—all lighthearted, on the surface. Of course all three have deeper meanings performed by this duo. Perhaps in testament to their mission, both Awad performing solo and the two performing together received a wildly enthusiastic reception at a venue that tends to attract a fairly conservative audience.

Noa was also applauded for her almost ceaselessly energetic performance. Noa has a two-and-a-half month old daughter (her third child), who is traveling with her and nursing through the night. At a keyboard solo at the end of the show, Noa lost track of herself, and rather charmingly shared the source of her exhaustion. She related her 4 AM conversations with her daughter ("Ga," from baby, deep sigh from Ima), and persevered at the piano until she got her own composition right. Oh, and she looked fabulous, too. This U.S. tour is finished, but more information about Noa is at *http://www.noasmusic.com*.

ELIZABETH MANDEL

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

a short story by GAIL LABOVITZ

HOW DO I EXPLAIN IT? THE TRUTH IS, YOU DON'T. WHO COULD YOU TELL WHO WOULD BELIEVE IT? YOU MEET IN GRAD SCHOOL

and from the very beginning you're best friends. This seminar, that seminar, you read each other's work, share advice on conference papers, and dissertation defenses, and publishing, and job talks. She gets a tenure track position in upstate New York, the following year you get a tenure track position somewhere in the Midwest, and pretty soon she's got a book contract too. You fly east for her wedding, and they drive out for the naming of your first child. And then one day she calls you, and even the ring of the phone seems ominous, and when you pick up her voice is all small and you know something is wrong and you say to her, it's okay, tell me what's wrong, and meanwhile you're running all the possibilities through your head, sure you can support her whatever it is: she's unexpectedly pregnant, they can't get pregnant, he's leaving her, she had an affair with a student, a fellow faculty member, a dean, a dean's wife, she got lousy teaching reviews, her book contract fell through.

And then she starts to cry on the other end of the line, and you say it can't be that bad and she says yes it is and you figure it has to be the dean's wife or probably the book contract, and maybe you even squelch a tiny moment of schadenfreude that now you'll get tenure first, because really you love this person, she's like the sister you never had, not a competitive relationship at all. I'm a failure, she'll wail, and you'll say, no, you're the smartest person I know, and mean it, and since you're both academics, you really do think you know a lot of smart people. I found a lump in my breast, she says, or rather her husband felt it while they were making love, but you're too shocked to think too much about that latter fact or to be grossed out by it. So she has surgery, and starts chemo, and her doctors are cautiously optimistic so you are not as cautiously-as-you-should-be optimistic. She e-mails you pictures of herself without hair, and you send her packages of chocolate and silly hats and even once a Cher wig that you find on sale the first week of November. For a little while, her whatsit count (you're in the humanities, not the sciences, you can never remember all that medical jargon) goes down, or up, or whatever it is that you want it to do, and you forget to be cautious at all in your optimism. She's editing her book, and thinking about applying for a better job at a better school in a better location. But she starts getting pain in her legs, and the doctors find a new tumor at the base of her spine, and then at least three in her liver. They start one last round of extra strength chemo, but no one is optimistic at all now.

You don't say to her, what will I do without you, but she knows you're thinking it. You'll be okay, she says, I promise, and you want to say, No, I won't, but you don't, because that would be unfair; this isn't her fault and it's not like there's anything she can do about it. And then two weeks later she develops pneumonia because her immune system is so weakened, and her husband holds the phone up to her ear but she can't talk to you because of the ventilator and you don't know what to say because goodbye is so final, and two days after that the doctors take her off the ventilator because it's only prolonging the inevitable, and she dies.

For a while you can't write. You're supposed to go to the annual conference in your field, but when the program book comes in the mail, you read the paper titles and they all seem meaning-

less. Worse than meaningless, a scam; for the first time you think maybe you understand why next month the Wall Street Journal will run an article making fun of offerings like "The Phenomenology of the Female Phallus in the Folios of Philo," even though they didn't bother to send a reporter to cover the conference. Maybe you'll cancel your trip. Won't the university be happier if you stay and teach those days?

But then you see that you've also gotten a package in the mail. Her book has come out, and her husband has sent you a copy. It sits on your shelf for a week or two; you aren't ready to read it. Finally, you tell yourself, you'll read the acknowledgments at the front of the book, look for your name, which is sure to be there. And it is, but there's also a little superscript number,[1], a note; you've never seen *that* in acknowledgments before. So you flip to the endnotes at the back, and the note says, "See 'The Phenomenology of the Female Phallus in the Folios of Philo,' unpublished conference paper." Unpublished? It hasn't even been given yet! But suddenly you think, I guess I will go to the conference, and more than that, although you feel both eager and sheepish, you go to the paper with the strange title, arriving ten minutes early but also staking out a seat at the very back of the room. You sit through two uninspiring presentations, breathing in the dry, recycled air of the civic convention center, trying to find diversion in observing the way in which the hanging crystal rods decorating the light fixture over head have a prismatic effect on light of the fluorescent bulbs hidden underneath, fighting the inner voice telling you this is crazy, leave now. And then finally the moderator introduces the speaker you've been waiting for, and your heart speeds up, and within two paragraphs it's practically running the Kentucky Derby—this person is on to something! This is the theoretical insight you need! You find yourself rooting frantically in your bag for a pen, and despite all your difficulties lately, you're still enough of an academic that you always carry at least one with you at all times, and now you're scribbling notes into the first blank paper you see, the margins of the conference program. When the session is over, you try to push your way to the front of the room—now you're sorry you chose to sit at the back—and by the time you get there, the speaker has left, gone out of your life as mysteriously as she came into it.

You go out to the lobby and find a cart selling coffee, and sit somewhere rereading your notes, letting your latte go cold and oblivious to the people flowing past you on their way to other sessions. Who was the Greek guy who supposedly jumped out of the bath and ran outside naked yelling "Eureka"? That's how you feel now, except that throwing off your clothes here in the middle of the conference would be sure to be seen, and only kill any chance you have of getting a position at a better school someday. You go up to your hotel room, open your computer, and start writing, and only stop when your husband calls to remind you that it's your daughter's bedtime and she wants to say

nightie-night to Mommy. I've been writing, is all you say to him, and he says, Yeah? That's great, honey, what about? And you say, Just some random ideas I had after a paper I went to, because you suddenly think you might jinx things if you say anything more.

When you get back to your small, Midwestern town after the conference, you know you need to begin right away at the library. Unfortunately, your school's collection is less than large; you're also already contemplating when you can make the two hour drive to the state school up the interstate, or whether you'll have to wait on the unpredictable arrivals of interlibrary loans. You're a little afraid to pick up your friend's book; what if the note is not there, and it was all some strange delusion? But you're also drawn to the book, and sure enough, the little [1] is still there by your name. When you turn to the back, though, something *has* changed. The note now reads, "As _____ has written…" and you're not sure it's a very good page at that. Well, but you know what to do, right? You've left her book on your desk at home; you can hardly contain yourself during your afternoon class, rivaling the students today in your eagerness to be outta here and on the road already. But then, when you're actually there at your desk, holding the book, you find your palms suddenly sweaty, your heart pounding, what if it's not there anymore? Maybe she's angry that you haven't checked in with her in a while? But wasn't it always like that, maybe you didn't talk to each other for a while, but then when you did, it was like you hadn't left off the last conversation at all. Surely it'll be okay? And in the end, what else is there to do?

With trembling fingers you flip the pages, and you literally go weak at the knees with relief when you see the superscript [1] floating there by your name. And as you flip pages, the book practically falls open to the notes at the end, the spine unbroken in the middle. A long note today. Quickly you scan down it, and then you slow, and then you stop, and after a few deep breathes, start over from the top. She's got her reviewer's hat on again, and the subject is you. And not just typos either. Sure, she knows what's wrong with your stalled chapter. Only you don't need a reference, or a citation, or an inspiring reading assignment to make things right. There's a fundamental weakness in your argument, and she's all over it, like a mountain lion on a slow, old elk.

Next month the Wall Street Journal will run an article making fun of offerings like "The Phenomenology of the Female Phallus in the Folios of Philo," even though they didn't bother to send a reporter to cover the conference.

there is exactly the long citation you need from an article in a major journal in your field that you know your library does not subscribe to. Things continue like this, and each day you write two or three new pages.

After a week or so, you remember that you ought to call her husband to thank him for sending you her book. I only just recently started reading it, you say, true and untrue all at once. Have you read it, you ask him, and you listen to his pause, before he opts for diplomacy, It's not my field so I tried, but I really don't understand it, and although he's a PhD, his degree is in chemistry, so you guess that too is true and untrue all at once. What unsatisfying rational theory would his scientific mind invent if you tried to tell him what you've been reading? I've found it thought-provoking so far, you say, letting him take the hint if he wants, but you're also experiencing a frisson of pleasure in the idea that whatever emanation of her spirit it is that she put into the book is for you and only you.

You keep her book handy as you continue your work. One day your footnote is a dead-on critique of the latest book by a senior scholar in your field, a pompous blatherer left behind by the turn in theory twenty years ago. Inwardly you thank her for sparing you the effort of reading it carefully yourself, and actually enjoy pondering whether copying out her language would be plagiarism. Another day she points out some typos in your most recent writing, and you scamper off sheepishly to correct them. And so on. For a while, things flow. Her book is always nearby, but suddenly you realize you haven't had to consult it for quite some time.

And then, inevitably, you come to a sticky part in the chapter you're working on, and one day you write only one page, and

But, but, but… She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand what you're trying to do here. You always argued about theory anyway. How dare she!

Well, yeah…, but, but, but…, maybe you really ought to have read some of what's in the actual body of her book, which you still haven't gotten to, and not just the acknowledgments with your personal footnote. What is she, just an info ATM?

Be honest. It's not how dare she critique your work—it, and you, will be stronger for that. No. How dare she die. How dare she leave you. And for the first time in months, you cry, truly cry, body convulsing with the force of it, book clutched to your chest.

Finally, when the storm passes through you, when there's nothing left to give, with fingers still trembling, damp and salty, you turn back to the front of the book, and open to the page that reads "Chapter One," and begin. After that, the work of writing your chapter, your book, your life without her. ■

Gail Labovitz is a Conservative rabbi and associate professor of Rabbinic Literature at the American Jewish University. She dedicates this short story to the memory of Dr. Elka Klein.

Winner of this year's Charlotte Newberger Poetry Prize

This was an amazing year. There were so many excellent poems, of so many different sorts. The winner I have chosen is "The Fifteenth of Av." In Israel, the Fifteenth of Av has become a sort of Valentine's day. This rich poem crosses so many boundaries in its capturing what this Jewish holy day might mean to a woman in our time. Is it a secular poem, is it a religious poem? It is really both. It shows how an ordinary surface life can be deepened by letting Jewish meanings in—Judaism of present and past, earth and heaven, nature and spirituality, war and peace, girlhood and womanhood speak to each other in this poem. The voice of the Lord and the voice of the Shekhinah are both made real. This is a woman's poem celebrating life—two good hands in the good dirt of it.

—Alicia Ostriker

THE FIFTEENTH OF AV

by JANE SEITEL

1
The Farmer's Market

Noontime, the market heats up. August wilts field greens.
Sunflowers tuck their heads. Listless, I pick peaches, peppers,
silver queen corn. On the pavement, small trees in earthen pots—
trees with five-fingered leaves flag me down. Come here.

Touching their smooth hands, I ask their name. Fig Trees. Desert
Kings under the scorch lit sky: A blaze of Israel in East Baltimore.
The Rabbis once argued if the Eden Tree was Fig or Pomegranate.
They said Figs were fruits of wisdom to be picked, one

by one through summer to fall. The Rabbis said God gave us this:
The Fifteenth of Av, a feast day after the three weeks sorrow season—
a day when mourners rose from their low stools, and in Jerusalem
maidens danced vineyards, harmonizing their songs with honeybees.

Today is that holy day. I watch the youthful figs being watered,
settled in their temporary dwellings. Small green fruit hangs limbs
lightly, a blush of pink brushes their skin. Tasteless fruit waits
to sweeten the earth. In my yard, earth waits to welcome me.

2
The Lord speaks:

David will not himself build my temple,
Though the heron provide his quill;
Though pure olivewood furnish his staff
and lapis inlay his rosewood harp.

Although his hands may be clean now, forever
The invective sword marks them.
The indelible blood stains them;
A monarch's dagger conjoins his hip.

David shall not place the cornerstones, but Solomon.
Let my temple arise from the hands of masons.
Let the stones be carried by strong backed boys
Whose tools are forged in the pure fire hearth.

And each year on the Fifteenth of Av,
You shall break their ax handles:
Smelt down the iron of their blades —
Dissolve their elements into my molten word.

3
The Voice of the Shekhinah:

I am mist rolling down the parched hills.
I am moisture settling the vineyard
and down-traveling the silent vines.
Pour my nectar into their congregation.

Today I come to sweeten their fruit.
Today the maidens dance between rows
As they flirt with root and with berry.
Barefoot, their soles are turned amaranthine.

Oh daughters, reach down and gather clusters.
Reach up and snap brightly your cymbals.
Today I will feel the quiver of joyful lips.
Today my juices will run down the open throat.

4
Planting a Fig Tree

On the Fifteenth of Av, I empty my purse gladly.
Eighteen dollars for a young fig, started slowly
which will grow high in time. The leaves of polished
malachite will cover my small garden and mark

my seasons. I dig into the crusty knoll. I shake out
the root ball, inhaling its peat. My hands are brown
with earth: My dark eyes lit with sky. Beads
of sweat speckle my arms: water pools around freed

roots. The Fifteen of Av comes by spade-full. The day
arrives unpotted and replanted on leased land. It pulses
veins of Chlorophyll and the slow growth of fruit:
figs ripen into visions of maidens dancing arbors.

Lilith is grateful for the support of Charlotte Newberger, the Chicago arts patron whose generosity helps make possible Lilith's poetry pages throughout the year.

This one drew tears to my eyes. It is an elegy and a prayer, that so beautifully—but also so realistically and even with humor—identifies a beloved dead mother with the undying Mother.

I SING THE SHEKINAH'S PRAISE

by JOANNE SELTZER

Visit me again, Mother, come at night,
complexion ruddy or post-mortem white,
Sleeping Beauty or closetful of bone,
delude me, whisper, "Girl, you're not alone."

Only at night, lightfooted as a cat,
give me a blessing, reassure me that
humanity transcends the rat-trap game
played in exchange for x minutes of fame.

Now put your left foot in, your left foot out
and shake until you plotz, no longer stout,
no longer thin, no longer anything
you ever were, no longer suffering...

O Mother of the earth, your comic dance
turned tragic long before incontinence
snapped you into disposable diapers,
rolled you and turned you to ward off bedsores.

O Mother of the sky, queen of the Jews,
look down on me in any phase you choose,
be darkly new, develop like a flower,
be cheese, be tidal flow, be womanpower.

O Mother of the sea, throw me a rope
and a placenta, teach me how to cope
with memories of shame-like when I peed
on the cellar floor-and worse-I lied.

O Mother of my dreams, rebirth my soul
by catching every spark, declare me whole
in your own image, scold if I do wrong,
forgive this blasphemy, stand tall, be strong.

In this extraordinary poem, the tragedy of "the situation" in Israel/Palestine is seen through an Israeli woman's eyes. An Israeli woman who imagines that a Palestinian woman might be like her, angry and afraid. What a simple argument for peace this is. Better than any op-ed.

FROM MY KITCHEN WINDOW

by ROCHELLE MASS

I often think there's a woman on the hill
over there, who looks out her kitchen window
in my direction
as she prepares dinner for her family.

Perhaps that woman has watched our village grow.
Perhaps she's seen it spread over the Gilboa
new homes built for young families
children playing in the yard.

I watch Jenin stretch so wide
I have to turn my head
each way
to see the full size of it.

Perhaps that woman is picking olives, as I am
soaking them in large bins then
slicing lemons, adding coarse salt
tossing in bay leaves, peppercorns and

sharp red peppers to get the right flavor. Perhaps
she helps her husband, as I help mine
take their crop to the local press, return
with gallons of oil.

I watch evening stagger over Jenin as
I soap my dishes
see lights splash
over the city.

I wonder if that woman
is looking my way—
I would ask if she's angry
if she's afraid.

I laughed out loud at this poem. You will too.

BRIEF PRAYER AT A COUSIN'S WEDDING

by JUDY KATZ

If God is a woman
please don't let her wear
a wig, like the one
my aunt is wearing
now that she is religious.

Or a long, brocade dress
that stands still
while the body inside it
struggles to move.

Don't let her fall
for the modesty of the doomed
and dispirited,
the sad or weary
or guilty.

If God is a woman
let her dress like Flo—
turquoise scarf tied at the neck,
hair pulled back
from an open face.

Let the fabric of her skirt
float to the knee.
When she sits down,
please god, let her show
a little skin.

A mysteriously lovely poem, part children's song, part psalm, part riddle, it is like a Jewish response to Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." I will feel blessed every time I reread this poem, while puzzling over its meanings.

QUESTIONS FOR THE FEAST OF WEEKS

by MARNIE HEYN

why does the green grass grow all around, all around?
because the rain falls on the just and unjust alike
because the creator blesses us

why do we drive the beasts of burden, feast on them?
because they feast on the green grass that grows
when the forest is driven back
because the creator blesses us

why do we not eat the grass?
because we lack dignity and cannot turn our backs
because the creator blesses us

why is there some grass we cut short?
that we may strut on it
because the creator blesses us

why do we cut the grass short?
that no one may hide in it
because the creator blesses us

why is there some grass we let grow long?
when we were done being slaves in the east we hid
in the tall grass and ate its seed-heads
which did not make us bend to the earth
because the creator blesses us

why do we let the grass grow long?
two good rains and it gets away
because the creator blesses us

why does grass run away and hide in the waste places?
we have other things to do
because the creator blesses us

why do japanese beetles hide their babies under grass?
when we were slaves in the east
tyrants killed babies hidden in the orchard
babies hidden in rivergrass were spared
because the creator blesses us

why does the earthworm tend first to the grass?
the forest and field are his farms too
because the creator blesses us

why does the mole come glad to grass?
just paving the way to kingdom come
because the creator blesses us

why does the cat run to the yard and crop long grass?
her endearing fur will choke her but for the grass
but the creator blesses us

why are those men walking invisible mazes in the grass?
to please themselves
because the creator blesses us

why do we lie on the grass in the dark and look up?
we says it is to count the stars and remember
because the creator blesses us

why does the grass go on growing?
because the creator blesses us

A midrashic poem with a twist. This Eve, looking back, asks some essential feminist questions.

EVE TO THE SERPENT

by RUTH KESSLER

These questions since haunting my days:
How did I—
who took the first step,
who mustered the courage,
who extended my hand towards the tree of Knowledge
and handed to Adam that fruit of defiance—
come to be ruled by my
follower...

And my daughters since leashed to their husbands,
meekly inching their
way behind down
history's road,
content with
the stale
crumbs of
their masters'
benevolence?

These doubts still nettling my nights:
Had I not followed my heart,
not extended my hand toward your lure—
would mankind have even now populated Eden,
forever-after gifted that blessed felicity, that seasonless bounty?
Would Evil's thorny weed not have sprouted,
spread here? so many Cains not have raised their
murderous hand?

Would I
not have gotten impaled forever on
the rancorous beam of history's spotlight—
my daughters kept cowering in their fathers', husbands' giant
shadows: muted, ignorant,
servile, female ruses
their only weapons—

And our road to
freedom so long... so
serpentine...?

I taught you your name.
Did you think
to teach me regret?

DOWN UNDER

a short story by LEE KOFMAN

MY MOTHER EATS HERRING FOR BREAKFAST. SHE USES HER FINGERS TO RETRIEVE THE BARE BONES OUT OF HER MOUTH AND TO PUT THEM BACK ON HER PAPER PLATE. SHE SUCKS IN THE MOIST FLESH AND STARES BLANKLY AT ME, AS I CLEAN MY BRUSHES.

"Mama, would you like anything else to eat?"

"Don't worry, I'll manage."

Feeding her is never simple. She only eats kosher food and refuses to use any of my kitchenware because it is "impure." Since her arrival in Australia, a week ago, we shop for her food around Elsternwick and East St. Kilda. We enter the dark shabby shops stuffed untidily with imported goods bearing Hebrew labels. The floors are sticky and the shop assistants wear bouffant wigs like my mother. She feels at home there, perhaps more than in our sunny flat, full of my paintings. We come back loaded with canned gefilte fish, egg salad and frozen *cholent*.

My mother watches me experiment, mixing cornflower blue with lemon chiffon, but as always, she doesn't ask me anything about my painting. She is bent over the food, her elbows solidly on the table. Her lips are oily with the fish.

"Are you okay?" I am as disgusted as I used to be in my childhood.

"Shhh…" says my mother, "The kabbalah teaches that when we're eating, we feel God's presence."

She finishes her meal, absentmindedly picks her teeth and whispers an aftermeal *brakha*.

"So what are you going to do today?" Daniel breaks the silence. It is Sunday, but he has to work. Here is the day I have been dreading since her visit began; the two of us alone. For the first time since I left Israel five years ago.

"Look! Look! Chagall!" inside the National Gallery my mother urges me past stony, industrial-looking floors and walls. What a setting for the luxury of past art—is it mere misunderstanding or deliberate contempt of the pioneers used to asceticism? I always feel incurably foreign here, craving long marble stairways and chandeliers, soft silk and polished boots from my Russian childhood. My memories draw an invisible barrier between me and my new home.

We walk past the modern art section. The minimalist exhibits, bleak like anorexic partygirls, match the building's spirit and make me wonder whether my own paintings depicting lewd, masked beauties with gold and silver splashes of color, have any future in this country. The critics write I am too European; as though it is a new measurement of failure; as though decadence is outdated in Australia, and equivalent to decay.

I feel more comfortable in the *Modernists* section.

"*Dochenka*, Chagall was Jewish!" my mother pants behind me. We stand before a large canvas depicting a village of black fences and cherry-red roofs. Its houses, trees and hedges—painted in rough, thick brushstrokes—are pushing, climbing on top of each other, invading. I step back from this density, and from my

PAINTING: GREEN LADDER BY ELLEN WIENER, 2003

mother. From the distance, as I breathe more deeply, I see two lovers in the painting, dressed in dark clothes like mourners. They float in a spacious, yellowgreen sky, high above the village. The young man with curly hair gently cups the breast of his beloved. In their sad, dark eyes there is a reflection of their village. Perhaps they are eloping, but will they ever break free from this memory? I feel like crying. I want to be alone.

My mother grabs my arm: "Chagall was born in Russia just like us. *Nyet*, actually it was Byelorussia. What a rotten place, I tell you, those Byelorussians, they hated Jews so much. There were always pogroms, always pogroms. After the revolution when Chagall ran away to Paris, all he ever painted was his village. But how could he, after everything they'd done to us?"

She lets go of my arm only to put up a wavering finger: "Look at these people, flying. He always painted dreams. What a big dreamer he was… to paint Russia like some fairytale. Huh! What a joke. He should have got on with his life, just like I did."

Her voice has always been young and slender. I can picture her back in Israel, lecturing to her students: "…so I said to those Russians: 'Either you let us out of this country, or I'll burn myself right in Red Square.' They let us go. What could they do?"

I shut my eyes, pretending she is her voice.

My mother is truly excited. I've never observed her before in such public situations. In Israel we'd meet over nervous Sabbath dinners: *Dochenka, your dress is too short. Wash your hands. Be quiet now, papa is praying...* Even now in my home where she is my guest, it is the same on Friday nights: *Daniel, wear this yarmulke. Hurry, let's light the candles.* She will not calm down until the conditions are just right, the *Kiddush* wine gulped and the bread blessed, but even then she seems busy. I snap at her more often than I would like. "You and your God…What would you do without him?" But she just ignores me. She sneaked a photo of the late Rabbi Lubavitch into my car "for safe driving." On long drives I stare crankily at the holy man's austere, bearded face, but feel oddly secure.

We have never just spent time together, so it has never occurred to me that we both might admire paintings. I try to draw out the moment and introduce her to one of my little passions.

"See this painting? It's Dorothea Tanning, one of the only women surrealists in Paris in the 1920s. These surrealists, they wrote a manifesto saying a woman's job was to inspire. Women weren't supposed to paint. She's been excluded from most art books, but here, look she's next to Magritte; he's probably turning in his grave.' I smile at my mother.

"Tanning…" she repeats slowly. "Didn't she have a Jewish husband?"

I also have a Jewish husband, but, as my mother knows, we didn't have a traditional Jewish wedding. I didn't circle Daniel seven times and he didn't break a glass under the *huppa*, instead he took me to Kakadu for a honeymoon. Perhaps this is what my mother is here to do now, to remind us of our Jewish duties. Purposes make her happy. Chagall makes her happy, not Dorothea Tanning.

We decide to go see the Early Renaissance. Before the *Madonna and Child* my mother says, "You should have babies. I told Daniel, all this painting-shmainting… My silly girl." She pats me with her oily-fishy fingers. I shake her off.

"Mama, stop it! Let's have fun. C'mon, I'll show you Melbourne."

It is her first trip outside Israel, but all she wants to do is iron our clothes and vacuum the carpets. It is not housework she performs, but an elaborate dance, tiptoeing skillfully on her sore toes, as though if she stopped, she might cease to exist.

She says, "I came to see you, not Melbourne, you silly girl. One day you'll have your own daughter … All right, all right. Anyway, when you have your own, you'll understand."

Melbourne grants us a beautiful day. The sun peeps green through the abundant foliage and the scant wind cools our sweating bodies. I navigate between the cars: "Mama, look at the Yarra."

Small boats glide across its glossy surface like swans.

"Very nice," my mother nods. Her gaze is fixed on my profile. Intermittently she watches the road reading the signs out loud: *Left to City Rd; Slow down, children crossing; Seventeen parking spots available.* Occasionally she advises, "The truck behind is going too fast. Careful!"

I have no idea how others manage to go for a coffee or movies with their parents. My mother was always too busy for leisurely things, preferring productive activities, like studying kabbalah, marking her students' homework, arguing with my father or cooking large Sabbath dinners.

I keep driving, but rather than enjoying the view she grooms her new pet project, Daniel's family tree: "His paternal grandfather was from Poland? And what did he do for a living?"

Since her arrival, I've started breaking things. The frame of my newly mounted painting. Daniel's glasses. I trod on my palette, flooding the carpet with sparkling gold. I can't work anymore. I just want her to go. Since her arrival I've counted not the days, but the hours. This is the secret I keep from Daniel. My secrets are mounting, not my paintings.

Last night I pushed Daniel away. "Have I done something wrong?" he asked.

My tears flooded his chest.

"She's in the other room. She's alone..."

"So what? What's the big drama? She seems pretty happy to me. Anyway, soon she'll be back with your father, babe.'

I hid my face in his chest. How could I explain? How could I explain my drifting father, daydreaming with the Russian radio as his lullaby? How could I explain my mother's constant erratic movement, as though she were escaping some memory? Or her bare legs, which she'd shown only to me? Their dark-purple veins trap her like fishing net.

The night was metallic blue. Daniel's breathing had grown steady. I stood on the balcony, peering into the giant orange windows of the city's skyscrapers, bright like stars. I wished my paintings were bold like them, dazzling onlookers, filling them with emotion. How do you paint feelings if you're not Chagall?

I could paint the thick veins on my mother's legs and the reviewers could again praise the virtuosity of my brushstrokes, the intricacy of patterns. But it would be just another failure.

I couldn't sell you so cheaply, Mama. I want them to see my pain. That choking pain on seeing your aging legs. But how?

Perhaps I'll paint you as you used to be, when we rented a wooden hut in a Siberian village and in the frosty mornings my father used to drown mice in the outside toilet. You wore that red dress there, the one with puffy princess-sleeves you'd got on the black market. You'd saved for five months and had then stood before my father, your hourglass body tight-wrapped. *A new haircut?* He'd asked. Then went back to his books.

I want to show my mother my iridescent, sparkling Melbourne—but instead we drive in circles.

"What else would you like to see?" I ask, casually turning the wrong direction into a one-way street. I know the answer. Something like: *All I want to see is you and Daniel. That's my greatest pleasure. Besides, of course, having grandchildren…*

She is sprawled frivolously like an odalisque on the humid grass, fondling the muscular body of a grey kangaroo.

"I have to see a kangaroo."

I almost collide with a car heading towards us. Rabbi Lubavitch, with his white Santa-Claus beard, promptly rescues us while giving my cleavage a nasty look.

"Your father told me not to come back until I'd seen a kangaroo!"

We leave the city behind. The houses recede, the horizon yawns its grand, pink mouth, and the energy of the city lets us go. Even Rabbi Lubavitch lets go of my cleavage. I open the window, breathing in the smell of warm grass. I long to transplant this smell and the endless Australian meadows onto my canvas. This will be my version of pioneering, a way to possess this tough land.

But perhaps, like my mother says, I'm just vain and self absorbed.

My mother ignores the changing landscape, the low hills and small makeshift graveyards. Instead, she looks at me; I can smell her breath. "At your age I already had two children. I wasn't so silly. I knew what was really important."

"I'm not you. You wanted to make babies, I'm making paintings."

"Do you think that I wanted to have children so early?" My

mother diverts her hazel, perpetually intense gaze from me. "Those were different times then. In Russia you had to bribe the Abortion Commission. We were students and didn't have the money. When we got married, they kicked us out of the university hostel."

I stop the car. My hands are shaking: "You never told me these things."

She stares blankly ahead, her wig is askew.

"Why did they kick you out?"

"Because we were Ph.D. candidates, because we were too good," she says slowly. "We had to focus on our studies, not babies. They gave us the privilege of sacrificing our youth for the mother country. It was either career or marriage; no grey areas. You'd never have understood."

I look at my mother as though she is a stranger. For the first time I notice how smooth her skin is, how unusually smooth is her voice. She sits very still.

"The day they kicked us out, your papa sat on a bench at the bus station, not moving… it was winter, minus forty. I wandered around in a neighboring village, knocking on doors, begging people to let us in, to rent us a room. I didn't even have time to think about an abortion."

She sobs quietly; her fleshy cheeks shine crimson. She wipes her eyes with a determined gesture and adjusts her wig. I want to hold her, but I can't; that's not how things are between us. When I was younger, I craved to make her happy, but she always said happiness was God's business. And perhaps this memory is just another excuse.

"Russia was no good to its people," says my mother. "It ate them like that Australian spider that eats its children. What's its name?"

"I don't know."

"You know, I'm really happy for you, *dochenka*. It's different today. Your papa and I didn't have our own place in our first years together. I'm so happy…" she sobs.

I'm weighed down with her sorrow, the sorrow that has always—since I was very young—driven me away to the strangest of places: kinky nightclubs, artistic communes, and now, Australia. She has infected me with incurable restlessness. But today, rather than running away I have an odd urgency to get to our destination.

"*Mamochka*, please don't cry. Another ten minutes and we'll see the kangaroos…"

I repeat these words like mantra, then turn on some music.

"Would you mind turning it down?" asks my mother.

"Mama, remember in Russia when we'd listen to opera records together? You told me the story of Onegin."

"I can't believe you remember that."

"I remember more: your red dress. I thought you were a princess."

"Me? A princess? You mean your papa was a prince, always the prince—not from this world. He was so spoiled…"

"Mama! Listen…"

"Sorry, sorry. Go on."

"*You* were like a princess. Remember? You weren't religious then. Your hair was long. You were beautiful, mama. We played piano together. Remember how I could never get it right? But you didn't care. You never cared about those things."

My mother stares straight ahead into the snaky road, "Who would think children could remember so well…" but this time she doesn't cry.

At the Healesville Sanctuary my mother limps towards the fresh-green spaces, her heavy buttocks moving quickly under her skirt.

"Hey, mama, I've got for you seeds to feed the animals."

"Oy, oy," says my mother.

"Here, have some."

"Oy, oy," my mother repeats, "If only your father could see this… a real kangaroo… in Australia…" Her eyes are glued to the smooth-skinned kangaroos as they stroll around looking regal. She grabs both seed cones from me, gathers up her skirt and, panting heavily but determined, she pushes her way to the front of a group of school children. Her limp is severe, but the cones remain steady in her hands.

"Mama, will you give me one, please? I want to feed them too."

There is no reply.

The sky is transparent, light blue. Two trembling naked figures float high above; their movements awkward and mismatched. The man is perhaps my young father with a head full of curly hair. He shyly covers his groin with one hand and puts the other on my mother's abundant milky breast. I can just hear her prayer: *Baruch ata adonai… Blessed are you, God. You who has saved us from our village…* She rises suddenly upwards, then sinks back, below my father, and again till eventually she disappears and only her voice remains.

Baruch ata adonai…

Back on earth—blackskirted, she is sprawled frivolously like an odalisque on the humid grass, fondling the muscular body of a grey kangaroo.

"What the hell are you doing?! It's dangerous!"

But she is busy calling to a fat, pale wallaby, spilling words like seeds: "You lazy boy! Look how they've spoiled you here in Australia. You can't even be bothered coming to get your food… Come on, lazy. Come on, beautiful!" Her voice rises and rises, its music stripping her of her body, of our shared memories, of her age.

"Look how sweet he is." The wallaby has eventually accepted her invitation and is swaying towards her. She stretches out an open palm laden with food for *lazy boy*.

I sit down close to her: "Mama, you're spoiling him. In case you didn't know, he's not Jewish."

My mother smiles at me and lifts her head, glaring intensely at the summer sky, as if she too can see the floating lovers. ■

Lee Kofman is an Israeli-Australian author of three books in Hebrew. Her English publications (fiction, non-fiction and poetry) have appeared in Australia, the U.K. and the U.S. She is the recipient of the Australian Council Grant, several writing residencies and an ASA mentorship.

mah-jongg in the lives of jewish women

Call up a Jewish community center these days, and you'll likely find a mah-jongg game about to convene. Seattle, Albuquerque, Nashville, Denver, Stamford, Albany, … and what seem to be hundreds more. Mah-jongg is back.

Elissa Meth Kestin, a New Yorker in her 30s, took up the game in order to be able to play with her grandmother. Soon Kestin, who blogs at bamcrak.com, was teaching it formally at a Jewish center serving mostly young, single women. "Many people my age have sets in their closets"—inherited from their grandmothers, aunts, mothers—and they have "these wonderful memories of the game."

But before mah-jongg was Jewish, it was the craze of non-Jewish America. Introduced in the early 1920s, mah-jongg was exotic and fabulous. A set, notes a new exhibition on the game, "added to the sophisticate's repertoire. … [It] had the appeal of simulating an encounter with another culture." "Project Mah Jongg," running through January 2011 at New York's Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, traces the Jewish fascination with the game. Jewish women, notes curator Melissa Martens, embraced the game as an "acceptable" pastime that had been "vetted" as American. Quickly, they began playing it in their living rooms and in community centers and synagogues, using the game to raise money for Jewish causes.

Today, the National Mah Jongg League, founded by a group of Jewish women in 1937, boasts well over 300,000 members, a number that president Ruth Unger estimates has more than doubled in the last 20 years. Why? Consider it another step in the great American experiment of assimilation. "We have become very much more inclusive," Unger told Lilith. "Most of the new members that are coming in, we don't know how to spell their last names. Does that say it?"

In these pages, DOROTHY STERN *explains how mah-jongg games in that earlier era both acculturated and oppressed the Jewish women who loved them.*

But not all games today are your grandma's mah-jongg. Kestin, who works full time, plays about three regular games a month in addition to the sold-out classes she teaches at New York's 92nd St. Y. Gone are the fine china and bridge mix. Fancy? "Not in my circles. Often we order in and eat off the plates they've provided."

—Sarah Blustain

PHOTO: JAMES SHANK PHOTOGRAPHY

tiles & tribulations

by DOROTHY STERN

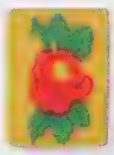
Women playing mah-jongg in the Catskills, c. 1960.

PHOTO: COLLECTION OF HARVEY ABRAMS

A pair of New York Times obituary notices from 2006 give us a clue to the primary role mah-jongg played in the lives of many Jewish women of a certain generation:

GROSSMAN—Beatrice (Bunny). *A woman of grace and kindness, celebrated by her many friends and adored by her family, has left us in her 90th year.... Beloved wife for over 60 years ... Bunny will be missed at the mah-jongg table ...*

EMMER—Ruth. *Died August 6, 2006 in Seattle, WA at the age of 85.... She was a founding member of the Modernettes, which started out as a group of girls and developed into a group of women who stayed in touch with each other for over 50 years.... She loved to play Mah Jong...*



Every week, for 30 years, my mother-in-law, Rachel Stern, played mah-jongg with friends in her home in Toronto. Tuesday afternoons meant candy magically appearing on living room tables, a special lunch of chopped egg or tuna, and a mom who was often in a hurry to take a bath and change out of her housedress into one of several pantsuits. Over the 62 years of their marriage, her husband, Marty, and the five Stern children must have witnessed more than 650 games of mah-jongg, each of which took place at a bridge table set up squarely in the center of the living room of the Stern's single-family home in their upper-middle-class neighborhood. And that would have been just a quarter of the games played: Chelly, as my mother-in-law was called, and her friends Ethel, Sonia, Ruthie and Toby probably played 2,500 games of "mahj" together, rotating living rooms every week.

On the surface, the intimate space of Chelly Stern's mah-jongg table was an ideal setting for female companionship. And because three members of the group were Canadian-born, it also became a space where new immigrants Chelly and Toby could learn Canadian customs in what felt like a warm and welcoming Jewish environment. At the mid-point of the twentieth century, when most middle-class mothers' workplaces were kitchens and laundry rooms, and dads routinely drove off to work in their offices downtown, the women-only game clearly reflected a culture in which women were expected to "dress, look and act" both feminine and motherly. As Betty Friedan so famously wrote in the 1963 *The Feminine Mystique*, "a thousand expert voices applauded their femininity." The gaming table was therefore a space of conflicting meaning and competing ideals, the site of both sisterhood and the suppression of feminist ideals.

While the games women have played changed over time, some aspects remained stubbornly the same: the well-appointed card table set up in the nicest room in the house, the display of finery, the rotation of hosts, the camaraderie among women. Gaming was not some kitchen-table enterprise, done in slippers and between chores, but a high-end performance, with finery of all sorts part of the set.

For Jewish women in the 1930s and 1940s, the game came along at a time when finances were limited, men were either at work or at war, and Jewish families often lived in close-knit enclaves. For these women, mah-jongg offered a convenient and inexpensive opportunity to socialize. Like the rituals of Friday night dinner, it was impossible to miss the sights and sounds of a "mahj" game in progress. (During the 1960s, a mid-afternoon peek into the living rooms of the houses on either side of the Sterns' would have revealed neighbours Ida and Sylvia engrossed in mah-jongg games of their own.)

Although mahj must have been entertaining, one has to wonder how and why it took such hold among Jewish middle-class women. Was it something about the game and its physicality that made it so pleasurable? And, in what ways did this pleasant experience constitute a gender dance, choreographed by the pressures of a 1960s social and political power matrix and articulated in both ethnic- and gender-specific ways?

There's no single solution to this riddle, though there are clues. An amusing 2001 article in The New York Times by Arthur Schwartz gives us some. "My mother," he wrote, "had a theory of gaming: you play mah-jongg when you're young because it's mindless and you can talk about your marriage and your children. When your children are grown, you switch to

VINTAGE MAH-JONGG TILES, COURTESY MUSEUM OF JEWISH HERITAGE - A LIVING MEMORIAL TO THE HOLOCAUST

canasta because it requires a little concentration, but not so much that you can't gossip about other people's marriages and children. And when you get old, you play bridge, because you've said it all and the game requires your full attention."

From personal observation, I believe Mrs. Schwartz's explanation rings true: because mah-jongg is a somewhat mechanical game, it is entirely possible both to play it well and to engage in personal conversation at the same time. And the game's gentle physicality—female hands touching each other across the tight landscape of the table-top—is important in understanding its popularity. Enhanced by the warm sense of an occasional personal touch across the rich surface of the colorful tiles, this table top seems to be an ideal site for a sense of belonging and sisterhood.

Then, of course, there was the requisite food that enhanced the game so much. Every mahj afternoon in my mother-in-law's circle began with the consumption of a "light lunch" of salad, daintily cut party sandwiches, dessert, tea and coffee. The special lunch was laid out upon the best tablecloth, and served using the hostess's finest china and silver. When the game was in play, most mah-jongg gaming tables were accessorized with snacks and drinks. Remarkably, the choice of two candies—bowls of liquorice allsorts and bridge mix—seems to have been ritualized to the point of being virtually a North American standard.

Cash also played a role in these women's embrace of mah-jongg. The gaming table was a place where they could make or lose their own money—even if the total at the end of the game was no more than three or four dollars. In an era when many housewives received weekly allowances of spending money doled out by their husbands, a woman might feel some pride in "earning" something, no matter how little it was.

At a time when most North American middle-class women were spending a majority of their time at home, consumed with issues of domesticity, it is not surprising that many sought relief in female companionship. An afternoon or evening of mah-jongg with close friends was a genuine escape from the tedious confinement of home-making, even if it took place in one's own home.

The stage set for all this activity was the living room, a very public room where, the 1957 *Ladies Home Journal Book of Interior Decoration* noted, "many friends and visitors get their only impression of your taste and housekeeping." Living rooms in the homes of middle-class Jewish women of this era were places of status and formality, presenting guests with the best that the homemaker had to offer. And the portable mah-jongg table was always set up right in the center of this space specifically because it was a site of tradition, dignity and decorum in the house, away from the tedium of cleaning, cooking and laundry. "You can't play mah-jongg in the kitchen!" Toby Waltman (one of Chelly's regulars) told me. "It is a cooking place, it is not a warm place. In a living room, there is life there. There are pictures, there is furniture, there is life! We wanted to be where there is life … not where cooking utensils are! That's why we chose the living room."

The hostess's display of silver and china also served a different purpose, we learn from historian Jenna Weissman Joselit's *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950*. It symbolized cultural assimilation into mainstream North American society: "Acquiring a piano, a matched parlour set, or an assortment of bibelots made the immigrant feel literally at home in America." Gaming, and mah-jongg in particular, took on similar significance as a symbolic tool of acculturation into mainstream society. "We were fast learners," Waltman, a Holocaust survivor, told me. "We had to learn the customs of Canada and to be Jewish very quickly."

For Jewish immigrant women, this space also provided a sort of inverse to assimilation: an opportunity for young women, uncertain of their place in Canadian society, to explore how to "fit in" within a safe domestic environment. When I asked Toby Waltman about this theory she responded very definitively: "I'll tell you why I think that it affected the Jewish women. We needed the recognition. We needed to get our togetherness somewhere. Jewish women stick together. Whether it is an organization or playing cards, or playing 'mahj'. It was the togetherness that we needed."

When seen at a distance of some decades, the mah-jongg table seems less beneficial to the women around it than Chelly's cohort perceived. Postmodern feminist philosopher Judith Butler suggests that gender isn't fixed, something one is, but rather it is something one does, a social structure that must be repeatedly "performed" in order to exist. Butler argues that surface acts,

What Happens When Men Play Mah-Jongg?

That is the question the pianist, actor and playwright Richard Atkins asks in his play "The Men of Mah Jongg," which has been traveling the country since 2008 (look for it next in Los Angeles this fall).

The play revolves around a depressed and debilitated widower named Sid, who decides to honor his wife's memory by convincing his three buddies to replace their Thursday-night poker game with mah-jongg. Of course, they think he's nuts: they tell him men don't play mah-jongg; they worry about "what would happen if anyone found out." "What the hell's happened to us?" shouts his friend Marv. "Used to talk politics, go to Yankee Stadium, gawk at pretty women fer'chrisake. Now whatta we do?... Play frikkin' Mah Jongg?"

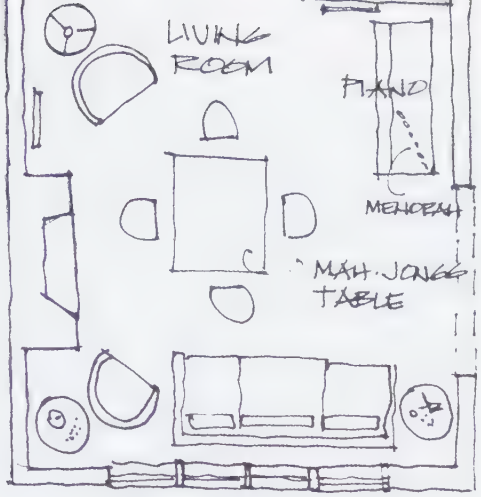
"I wanted to take my mother's love for mah-jongg and combine it with my father's gruff personality," comments the 53-year-old playwright, who grew up in a Jewish ghetto of Baltimore watching his mother play the game with her friends.

Eventually, the men do start to play, and—like so many Jewish women before them—in between bams and craks, the men start to talk. Playing the game, says Atkins from his home in New Mexico, "they tend to be more insightful about each other… rather than [seeing] just the usual poker buddy.… It's a way for them to see a different dimension in life, this game that is new and taboo. Like a person who has never been a photographer and takes a picture of an apple, and then sees so much in that apple that they've never seen before."

Does Atkins play? "My mom taught me, but you know I was a boy who played baseball and football, and I couldn't really be a boy who hung out with his mom and her girlfriends." It's that old story all over again, but Atkins's play makes clear it could have a different ending.

For more information about the play and upcoming performances, check online at http://momj.vpweb.com/default.html.

—S. B.



Living room of the Stern home, circa 1965, showing the [albeit temporary] prominence of the mah-jongg table; leisure-class ladies playing a floating game of mah-jongg, 1924.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, PRINTS AND PHOTOGRAPHS DIVISION

speech, gestures, dress and other personal attributes are simultaneously the very *doing* and the very *essence* of gender. In other words, it is solely the mundane, repeated acts and stylization of gender within our society that create an *illusion* of gender.

This notion of performance comes back to me again and again as I revisit that mah-jongg table. Here, ladies were staging a complicated performance of their own identities—as Jews, as Canadians, as women. The placement of the table in the center of the most formal room in the house was deliberate: at least for a few hours, they were the center of their own attention, gloriously stationed at the front of the house between the highly polished end tables and the velour sofas. I think even they might have agreed it was "for show."

But was this performance really so innocuous—a natural, effortless communication and physical touching around a 34-inch-square table? Even this enveloping feminine association—complete with the fashionable outfits, clicking of tiles, women's voices—however unintended, perpetuated the rigidity of gender norms that the players were enacting. Did this space give "life" to the players, as Waltman suggested, because of its warmth? Or, by virtue of its prescribed expectations, did it instead serve to reinforce the gender stereotypes of the era? And did the rigid decorum of the living room space itself work against the empowering effect of the mah-jongg table placed within it?

And what of the temporary nature of the mah-jongg table, taken down and set up within the course of a few hours? However unintentionally, instead of a site of female empowerment, this impermanence may have further contributed to its being a site of suppression. Stored in a closet for most of each week, the gaming table and chairs were not a permanently established part of the family's physical space. Unlike the piano, which was rarely used but permanently and prominently positioned in the living room, or the den off the living room for the husband/father, established for his private use, this women's space was brought out like the game itself, snapped open for a few hours at a time only to be packed up and hidden away again once the play stopped and women returned to their traditional domestic roles.

Contrary to easing their integration into North American society, the tradition of mah-jongg may also have inadvertently acted to stereotype Jewish women. The playing of mah-jongg was no secret, transmitted through various media or even in supermarkets and playgrounds—the way all stereotypes seem to spread. Outside of the Chinese men and women who continue to play, it is Jewish women who have historically been associated with this game. In their book *Mah-Jongg: from Shanghai to Miami Beach*, Christina Cavallaro and Anita Luu inform us matter-of-factly that "The National Mah-Jongg League was founded in 1937 in NYC. Some of the founders and many of its longstanding members were Jewish." As a consequence, the tradition of playing the game in the living room, surrounded by the best furniture and decorative items in the home, may have further reinforced the notion of Jewish women as representatives of a privileged female consumer class with abundant leisure time and a significant disposable income with which to shop: neither of which might be considered a particularly commendable attribute.

Within the framework of Judith Butler's performance theory, the seemingly straightforward and pleasurable pictures of women's game-playing take on new meaning. Rather than scenes of female intimacy and power, these weekly games might really have been weekly re-enactments of roles those women were socially constituted to play. The irony is that these women's performances were so convincing that they may only have served to reinforce their own subjugation.

When I look back now, I regard the mahj table both with warmth and with suspicion. The first time I met my mother-in-law she was playing mah-jongg with Ethel, Ruthie, Sonia and Toby. As soon as I walked through the front door with my husband-to-be, I could not miss these women in the midst of their game. Their table was situated in the centre of the living room, directly in front of the fireplace and to the left of the piano. My mother-in-law's dark green cut-velvet sofa proudly occupied the space in front of the window, with two petit-point arm chairs and side tables on either side. Several of her best pieces of china were perched on the fireplace mantle and her two best paintings were displayed prominently above the chairs. A small silver candelabra was positioned on top of the upright piano. Sitting in the breakfast room nearby, I could hear the clacking and mixing of tiles, the (not so quiet) nibbling on licorice allsorts and bridge mix, snippets of conversation about hairdressers, the significance of my presence, where to buy the freshest vegetables and best snowsuits, and, of course, their children's achievements.

It was the performance of a lifetime. ■

Dorothy Stern lives in Montreal and has just completed a Master of Architecture degree at McGill University.

"WOMEN'S HISTORY IS NOT JUST ABOUT WOMEN—IT'S ABOUT THEIR TIMES!"

What's Revealed in Those Boxes at the American Jewish Historical Society

by AMY STONE

Three dozen women artists and writers sharing white gloves around a conference table. Not post-feminist performance art, but a genuine blast from the past emanating from the archives of the American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS) in Manhattan this past April.

Archivists' stretchy white gloves were the ticket of admission to lay hands on precious 18th century letters or to unpack 1940s public affairs bulletins from Hadassah, printed on letterhead with the union bug, clearly demonstrating the mighty organization's respect for labor.

These literary and visual artists—from poets, novelists and painters to filmmakers and playwrights—were invited by Lilith and AJHS to unpack history, plumb the historical record, scrutinize our collective past, and use it in transformative ways in their future work. Among them were *Love, Loss and What I Wore* author Ilene Beckerman, poet Irena Klepfisz, artist and comic Flash Rosenberg and graphic novelist Leela Corman.

Three distinguished historians gave their perspectives on more than 300 years of woman-generated American Jewish history, complete with clues to the lives of

From left: Artist Anat Litwin and Lilith board member Frances Brandt look for clues to women's participation in the mid-20th century collections of Jewish organizations; In the back-office stacks, playwright Susan Dworkin encounters files of people she once knew well. The files reveal lacunae, too: a large box labeled "Fannie Hurst" contains only an anouncement of the writer's work.

the 2,000 Jews who lived in the American Colonies before 1776. AJHS has the pre-eminent collection of these pioneers' wills and other legal documents, along with rare personal letters.

Hasia Diner, New York University professor of American Jewish history and of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, singled out AJHS as "almost the only depository" for the "amazing documents" written by the women of these early Jewish communities. These were well-educated, privileged Sephardic women, whose men were merchants and whose lives were tied to the Jews of London, Amsterdam and the Caribbean.

If you're a writer out there looking for a sophisticated 18th century Jewish mother in America, Abigail Franks could well be your woman. White gloves were at the ready as Diner passed around Franks' letters, written in elegant script and mailed from Philadelphia to her son Naphtali at the "coffee house near the Royall (sic) Exchange" in London. Franks never spoke again to the two of her nine children who married non-Jews. Her husband was kinder, providing for their daughter Phila in his will and keeping channels open with her and her non-Jewish, politically connected husband.

Abigail Franks' papers provide "the most intimate look" at Jewish history in the Colonies, Diner posits. "Women's history is not just about women; it's about their times. The best windows into the past are through women." As the letters show, even a broken heart did not restrain Abigail Franks from finding fault with her religion, writing, [I] "heartily wish a Calvin or Luther would rise among us," decrying the "idle ceremonies" of the Jews and the Papists.

No idle ceremony, punishment was swift for Sephardic-Ashkenazic intermarriage in that early era. If a Sephardic man married an Ashkenazic woman in

Photos by Joan Roth

Colonial America, the man was ousted from his synagogue. Not so for a woman, however. As Diner explained, "A woman was the chattel of her husband. A Sephardic woman couldn't be thrown out of the synagogue because she wasn't a member." (Does this inspire the wail of a Greek chorus?)

Then there are the Shabbes candlesticks, these time-honored symbols of the Jewish woman's domain. Annie Polland, vice president of education at New York's Tenement Museum, focused her talk about 19th century Jewish women in America on the pair of silver candlesticks made in Poland and bought in St. Petersburg by the Grossmans of Kiev. Under attack, the matriarch of the family was shot, but one of her candlesticks took the bullet! In 1892, the Grossman family emigrated, bringing the candlesticks, one intact, one with a bullet hole, with them to Boston. What would a more pristine pair of Sabbath candlesticks indicate, asked Polland. "Unused!" shouted one of the writers. Right. "The complications of America," said Polland, are written in such gleaming and polished candlesticks, and she noted that women began to carve out roles in synagogue life, rather than exclusively in their homes, in order to demonstrate their middle-class status in 19th century America. And, interestingly, Polland observed, "Women can bridge class divides."

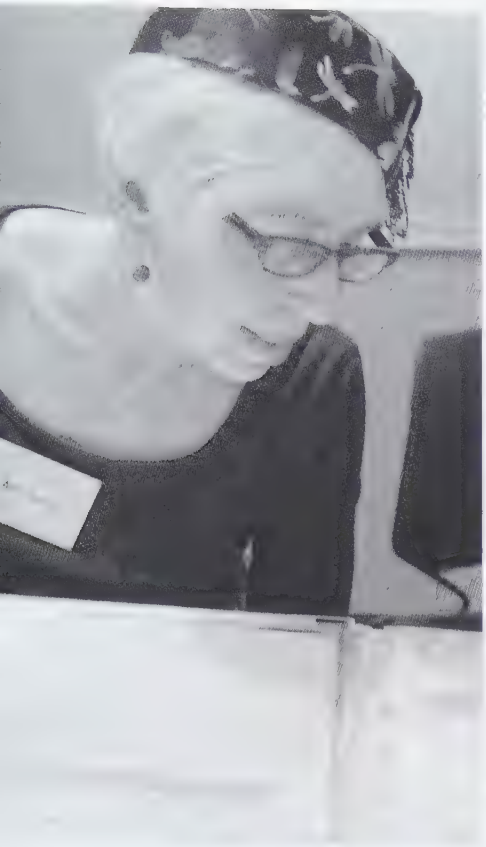
Deborah Dash Moore encouraged the participants to make their own selections from the boxes of 20th century documents brought into the light of day. "Engage with the materials themselves," she exhorted the women, each of whom sat facing a box of archival papers.

Demonstrating how "the perspective Jewish women bring is not the same as Jewish men," Moore, professor of history at the University of Michigan and director of its Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, cited the role of Jewish women's organizations, especially in the early years of the 20th century when many women did not go to high school. These organizations were a place for women to learn. Later, the Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress inspired the AJCongress to become the "pro-feminist lawyer of the Jewish people." There was no monolithic Jewish community. The American Jewish Congress files document court cases of Jews vs. Jews, with women often bringing these conflicts to the fore, such as when the AJCongress defended Jewish women suing Jewish male employers for workplace discrimination twenty years ago. (Is there the seed of an opera here?)

The goal of this extraordinary day was to inform, provoke and inspire creative uses of Jewish women's particular history. Watch for films, fiction, plays, sculpture and poetry from the women in the white gloves. ■

Amy Stone is a founding mother of Lilith.

For a full list of the participants, go to www.Lilith.org. To learn more about AJHS collections, visit www.ajhs.org. Hear podcasts of this remarkable day's presentations at www.Lilith.org/blog.



Clockwise from upper left: 19th century Shabbat candlesticks, bearing bullet-hole damage from an attack against Jews in Kiev in the 1880s; Amy Stone with documents on Jewish women in the movement to free Soviet Jewry; novelist Rachel Kadish, reading what she described as "two haunting drafts of a report written by an American Jewish woman working in the DP camps after WWII—the final, 'official' draft, and the more emotional, despairing one marked 'Never sent'. Because you trusted us with the raw material, we were able to have an unmediated encounter with a few small pieces of history." Below: Turn-of-the-last-century minutes from meetings of the National Council of Jewish Women.

RAISED BY JEWS

a short story by NAOMI SEIDMAN

ALONG WITH THE CART OF GROCERIES, MY MOTHER WHEELS IN THE JANGLE AND COLD BREATH OF THE WORLD. THIS KITCHEN IS HER STAGE, SMALL BUT CROWDED WITH INCIDENT, WITH INGREDIENT: FLANKEN IN BUTCHER PAPER, BARLEY, BIG BROWN POTATOES, THREE KINDS OF BEANS.

Loose-skinned onions spill from their net, a hairy turnip tips its tail over the edge of the counter. And then, like a gun in the first act, out comes a cellophane bag of candy corn, brash seasonal cousin of licorice whips, sugar-coated peanuts. My mother sighs as she clears a space for the candy on the counter. This is one of those kitchens where you could *eat off the floor*. It could be a television commercial, except for the speckles on the beans, except for the thick lenses my mother peers through, except that no one in this picture is going to eat that candy corn. Look at the little girl sitting there, staring at the Technicolor sunset candy, her mouth hanging open (adenoids). Look at the long braid down my back, blouse buttoned up to my skinny neck. This is 1966, before Paskesz dreamed up kosher cotton candy. You know I've never tasted a candy corn, never eaten anything that particular shade of orange or with quite so many ingredients. So what's this woman doing, dangling the forbidden artificial colors of the New World before her cholent-fed daughter?

My mother, having raised her captive audience, doesn't have to say a word. Impresario of the chopping block, she dices the onions with a virtuosity that in a better world would meet with drum rolls and applause. In this world I sit, swinging my legs to the rhythm of the knife and the bass line of the Frigidaire. The onions finally sizzling, my mother answers the kettle on the first ring and fills the glasses. For her baby she reserves the heel of the honey cake and a perfect white domino of sugar to go with her story. She breaks off a gooey piece and begins.

"You know what it is today, right?" she asks.

But I don't. What is it today?

"It's October, you know that it's October, no? Almost exactly fifteen years since I came here."

Having traveled over sea and land to this kitchen, my mother takes the long sip of sweet tea she knows she deserves.

"It wasn't easy for me, you can imagine, a new bride all alone in this country. Deddy was working hard, not just in the radio, he was traveling, giving speeches, Denver, Cincinnati, who knows where. A man like Deddy people wanted to hear, he had what to say about Israel, about the terrible things what happened in Europe. But it wasn't easy to get up and go to these places from one day to the next. Of course, he wasn't a well man then either."

Notice how we say his name, with two hard "d's," the word "dead" lurking in the silliness. Why? Who knows? But make no mistake—there's nothing silly about the man himself. His absence from this kitchen and the story is *important*. Everything my mother says about him has its own particular tang, served in every dish she cooks up like the recipes companies put out for their own products. She feeds her family pride in their father, slipping in a pinch of worry, peppered with a bite of resentment to which she's fully entitled.

"Only a short time I was here, maybe a month, two months. Let me see, I came right before Rosh Hashana and this was the end October, like today. I was by myself in this house where we lived in, in Queens. You remember. So I hear a knock. I don't know who could it be. In the whole Queens I don't know even one person. So I go to answer and I open a little the door and I see children, dressed up like Purim, but not really because they're not Esther and Mordechai, they're all in scary clothes. One is a ghost with a sheet, and one a cowboy, and one is… with the bones on his clothes."

"A skeleton?" I ask all those years ago, my voice hushed.

"Yes, a skeleton. You can imagine, I don't know what to think, and they say something I don't understand, ach, who knows what? It could be Chinese even. I didn't speak too much English then. I was scared what to think they want, these little goyim."

I gobble the honey cake to show my mother how to talk faster, so she gets past the scary part. This one I'll get to hear the end, because the end is America. But my mother goes on almost killing me with the way she's talking so slow, stopping every couple of words for a sip of tea while mine is still too hot.

"Then I see that they're holding out big bags full of candy like I should take and now I understand—it's Purim for the goyim. We have it in spring and they have it after Sukkes. I think I shouldn't hurt their feelings, even though I know it isn't kosher candy, so I put my hand in the bag and take a little and I put my hand in the other bag and take a little until I took from all the children, not to

offend. And then I say a nice 'Thank you very much' and I close the door and first thing, I throw out all that *hazerei*."

My mother rides her heavy Transylvanian accent on the "Thank you very much," rolling the "r" like a slow train up a Carpathian slope, hamming up the part for her American daughter. And then she laughs, from the Olympian heights of her fifteen years of experience with the natives.

"So when I was in Waldbaum's," my mother continues, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes, "I saw this junk and I thought maybe I should give back some of that candy I took that time. If they knock, we'll have what to give."

My mother turns back to the cholent, but that isn't the end of the matter for me, since I have all the autumn afternoon to circle the candy, ruminating on its relation to food in general and corn in particular. No trick-or-treaters came that evening. Where would they come from, in that neighborhood? You could walk for a mile in any direction before you saw a pumpkin. The next day the candy is in the junk drawer, secure against assault in its protective cellophane armor. And there it sat, out of sight but not of mind, until April, when it was finally swept away in my mother's pre-Passover assault. They say that we are what we eat, but maybe it's also true that we are what we don't eat.

Okay, no trick-or-treaters. But we *knew* about them. We *participated* in this great country, we heard of its customs, thrilled to its purple mountains' majesty. How? Mostly, I think, the *Reader's Digest*, which lived in the bathroom. "I am Joe's Spleen." Survivors of airplane disasters. Adopters of orphans from ravaged countries. We knew. But did they know us? They should, they should. And so it happened that I sent my mother's story to the editor of "Life in these United States," which paid the unimaginable sum of $300. Working on the piece, I stumbled. How to explain? By the third draft, my mother was a non-denominational immigrant from "the Old Country," grateful for the generosity of the New World. No Purim, no kosher. My mother, in this version, ate that candy and liked it. Looking up from my pad at the dining room table, I saw it unfold: She sat alone in that apartment, eating one candy corn at a time, licking her fingers between each bite.

I tried, reader. To have the story end the way I wanted it to end. To find some way to tell it. To cash in, if you want to look at it that way. One of those tries involved an M.A. thesis, called not "Life in These United States" or even "Death in That Europe" but rather "Varieties of Meaninglessness in Paul Celan and Nellie Sachs," presented to the Department of Literature at the University of Indiana, Bloomington. This history of mine isn't non-denominational anymore. Now it's academic.

Like other university students, I sometimes get on a plane and go home for Christmas vacation. But where I'm going isn't Christmas, and who could possibly think of Brooklyn in terms of vacation? Who else in this grand mid-December exodus has to do what I'm doing, changing from skinny black jeans to rumpled skirt in the redolent bathroom of the Eighteenth Avenue station? It doesn't really feel like going home either, since my parents are living in a second-floor apartment I've seen only once before, the address buried somewhere in the suitcase I drag down the street, gloveless fingers frozen around the handle and the wind feeling me up under the skirt. The brick row-houses look on, uninvolved, unrecognizing.

I don't recognize them either. This block was Italian last time I was here, but now it's drowning in the Jewish overflow from Boro Park, the plaster Madonnas packed up and big wheels and strollers rolled in. Everywhere you look there's another wind-blown sukkah jammed into a driveway or perched on a porch. Then I see the last Italian holdout, staunch in the effort to combat cultural isolation, the last Christians in a world of Jews. The birth of the baby Jesus would not go unheralded. Every window shouts its joy, the pine tree lifts its twinkling branches in Yuletide wonder, radioactive-blue deer rhythmically genuflect toward the pavement, along the roof shining choir boys lift pious open-mouthed faces to the purple Brooklyn heavens. Santa Claus commands a view from the porch, waving a plastic hand up and down the street to the black hatters and pregnant housewives, to me. He could be a rabbi, a nice, fat Rabbi, I think, as I always do, and cheer up. What if Jews kept Christmas (*kept*! I think, *observed*! Not, for instance, "celebrated")? There would be laws about how tall the tree should be, where the angels and the pine cones should hang, the sharpness of the tree cutter's knife, the acceptability of burned-out bulbs. My father, at the ritual meal, would give an ingenious talk on the relationship between the red heifer, poinsettia, and the founding of the State of Israel. Reb Santa would stroke his beard thoughtfully, with feeling. The next two-family house is where I'm headed—I recognize the rusting deck chair on the upstairs porch from bungalow-colony summers.

My mother's face is confused when she opens the front door. Last time she saw me I had some hair. In the second before she recognizes me I see the face others see, the one not changed by love and watching. But then she beams and hugs me and my stiff arms go around her. Having broken her heart six or sixty times, having let my own shrivel to the size and density of an M&M, it's the least I can do. Up the steep flight of stairs, the apartment wears garish shades of sea-green, remnants of the Mediterranean culture we've displaced to New Jersey. My mother grumbles to

We fall into three separate silences. My mother is hurt silent, my father is shrewd silent, I'm defiant silent, but with a squeezed heart.

my father: "I thought she was the delivery boy from Landau." My father laughs. My mother shakes her head to her Greek chorus: "Why does he encourage her?"

When I get out of the bath the glasses are on the dining room table, special treatment for the guest. This is where my father spends his time, now that he's home from wherever it is men disappear to, scribbling furiously on note pads at one end of the table. A black yarmulke, the kind candidates wear in synagogues, sits pointed and shiny on his bald head. He pays no attention to us, otherwise my mother wouldn't say the things she's saying. She keeps her eyes on the spoon clinking the inside of her glass.

"You know, I was thinking about those girls in the camp, the D.P. camp I told you about, where I met Deddy. He was already a busy man then, collecting the names of who was alive, who wasn't. He made a newspaper every day, one short list on one side, on the other side very long ones. You should see how they waited for that paper every morning. Like hot latkes it went."

My mother clinks.

"The girls?" I prompt.

"The girls, the men, everyone wanted that paper. But I was saying about those girls, how they would look at me with big eyes. I was the only one with long hair. All the other girls were coming out of the camps and they looked at me like I don't know what. I wasn't a skeleton like them, even though I was plenty skinny. In Bucharest we weren't exactly living like a king. They would come over to touch my hair. Some of them asked why they didn't cut my hair. You know what they thought. I don't have to tell you."

She doesn't have to tell me. I rub my bristly scalp. My mother sighs and gets up, and then tries to remember where she was off to. "Come on. Just a short Scrabble and then we all go to sleep." But there's something I've been wanting to clear up.

"Ma, why do we call Deddy Deddy?"

My father raises his head and then goes back to his page.

My mother looks confused, "What *should* you call him?"

"I don't know," I shift uncomfortably. "*Tatty*?" Tatty was what most of the kids in the neighborhood called their fathers.

"No," my mother shakes her head in disgust.

"Papa?

"*Papa*??

"Daddy?" I venture, feeling foolish. What a strange word, Daddy.

"But that *is* what we call him—Deddy."

"Oh," I say for as long as it takes me to comprehend.

"What?" asks my mother, staring at her puzzling daughter.

I shake my head. "Nothing," and my heart gets a little runny at the edges. No, I conclude, I wasn't adopted. Look at us. Could there ever have been any doubt? Under my mother's kerchief (her wig perched now on its sightless Styrofoam head in the bedroom) and my jeans, we're punched from the same mold: square jaw, round nose, squat peasant calves. What is it that separates us? Nothing as substantial as flesh. Nothing but a truncated vowel, the thud of a consonant. Who says that it's the word, and not the way it's pronounced, that's the basic unit of meaning?

"Come on," my mother says, giving up on me once and for all. "Scrabble."

My mother, queen of the New York Times crossword puzzle, master of two-letter printers' measurements and Vietnamese currency, turns the letters over to hide their secrets. We get to work. Halfway through her third turn the silence breaks. It takes a second to hear:

"'Tis the season to be jolly,

Tra-la-la-la-la, tra-la-la-la."

I walk out onto the porch to investigate, and then, suddenly, I'm angry. To hell with Reb Santa. I'm already talking as I lock the door behind me. "I can't believe it—they have some kind of megaphone or trumpet pointed straight at us. And it's after ten. Does this go on *every* night? I'm calling the police."

My mother peers at the board, counting aloud. "I have 54. It's your turn." She puts her hand in the bag.

The wry look in my father's eye travels straight to my gut. I see myself as he sees me, and it isn't pretty. The crew cut, the Anti-Defamation League attitude, my American birth—but isn't that his fault as much as mine, I want to whine. My mother finally catches what's passing across the table and looks up, "Oh them, they don't bother us."

I snort. "What are you waiting for? A *pogrom*?"

We fall into three separate silences. My mother is hurt silent, my father is shrewd silent, I'm defiant silent, but with a squeezed heart. Outside, the Christians hit a scratch and tell us to deck the, deck the, deck the. I turn, stumble into the back room, close the door and with the long practice of adolescence, fling myself on the bed and try to get miserable. But I can't do it—something's wrong. Am I too old? Is the room too neat? That's it. My mother's gotten into my things, books on the windowsill, clothes on the cabinet. I don't like this, and then I remember why I don't. I get up and pull the suitcase from under the bed, searching for a particular balled-up sock. I find it alongside its sibling in the top drawer of the dresser, as flat and emptied as my own heart. My goodie-bag, my self-medication, having survived the drug-sniffing dogs and X-ray vision of Indianapolis International, had fallen prey to my keen-eyed, sharp-nosed mother. I shut the light and lie down, waiting for the neighbors to pull the plug, my galumphing heart to settle down, my parents to give themselves over to sleep.

Finally, I tiptoe into the quiet kitchen. By the glow of the night-light I open the junk drawer, the mother lode, where all good things come to rest. Purple-gold buds of Humboldt's finest glint through the zip-loc baggie, nestled among rusty hardware and out-of-date Jewish Home for the Aged calendars. The refrigerator shifts gears, a radiator hisses. Outside the F train hurtles toward Coney Island, a garbage can rattling after it down the empty street. I close the drawer and sit down, uncannily alert, thinking about what it would feel like to expand my lungs with enough smoke to fill the space in this kitchen, until the walls come close as a warm blanket, until the house fits like a glove, like a shell, like a home. ■

Naomi Seidman is Koret Professor of Jewish Culture and Director of the Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and is currently completing a collection of short stories. Her most recent academic publication is "Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation" (Chicago, 2006).

D-I-Y Parenthood

Radical Single-Parenting by Choice, Deliberative Half-Time Mothering, Cross-Continental Spuncling. What's Up With "Family"?

The majority of Jewish women, myself included, marry men and beget joint biological children. We live within the safety—and anesthetic—of cultural norms, so thinking about alternative ways we might parent or partner rarely occurs to us. We don't, for example, ponder the following:

"Would I be a better parent if my 'romantic partner' and my 'parenting partner' were two different people?" "Would I be a better parent if I only parented half the time and found a 'parenting partner' in another household to do the other half?" "If I raised my kids communally, but without a partner, would that be a better fit?" These are questions so distant from our brain pans that we're more likely to ask if Bubbie ever fought the Boers.

From left: Jenifer Firestone and daughter, Hannah; Julie Greenberg's family; Hannah with her co-parents; the Greenberg brood, still germinating.

Heterosexual and fertile, we are also never really challenged to find out to what degree our behaviors are determined by what other people think—a question I contemplated a lot as I interviewed women whose parenting and coupling choices are wildly different from just about everybody else's. Plus these norm-indifferent folks are enviably confident.

In the stories about 'differently conceived' families that follow, Julie Greenberg and Jenifer Firestone describe creating kinship systems that break a million rules, but also roost upon sturdy new ones: *Always do a gut check. Do what's best for the child. Don't sweat what other people think.* Zoe Greenberg, 18, writes about growing up in her out-of-every-conceivable-box-in-the-world family. And would-be 'spuncle' Avi Levinson talks about finding—and then losing—the niche that fit him better than fatherhood.

These self-determining souls have something important to teach the ovine rest of us. Read on and be challenged.

—SUSAN SCHNUR

Lilith's writing on adoption and related subjects is made possible by a grant from The Sunny and Abe Rosenberg Foundation.

Breaking the Norms Confidently

How one mother, with a series of female lovers, two rabbinic sperm donors, two adoptions and one gay parenting partner, raises five exceptional kids.

by SUSAN SCHNUR

Lighting Hanukkah candles: (from left) Rosi, Zoe, Julie, Raffi, Mozi (Joey not shown).

When Julie Greenberg was eight, her newly-divorced mother, an activist in the civil rights movement, moved the family to rural Mississippi for two years. It was 1965, the year after three young civil rights workers (one Black and two Jews) were murdered there. That first summer the family took up residence in a racially integrated community—something unheard of in the deeply segregated South. Julie was the oldest of four. After her came Miggie (7), Katie (5), and Liza (4). Later there was a fifth daughter, Gwen. "A half-sister by another not-in-the-picture dad," is how Julie puts it. "The 'not-in-the-picture' was my mother's plan."

Julie's mother, Polly, a founder of Head Start and well-known child educator, came to Mississippi to implement a radical-activist nursery school project for Black, rural families; a population so poor their homes had no plumbing or electricity. Bringing enrichment programs to communities like these was revolutionary, but equally so was one of the project's core tenets: that children need to experience their parents as empowered. To that end, Polly ran the component of the project that organized and trained the preschoolers' uneducated parents to work as teachers, administrators, bus drivers and cooks—all the roles vital to a community. (In early-childhood education circles, the Child Development Group of Mississippi was, and remains, renowned.)

Every weekend, Polly would put the four girls into her Ford station wagon and they'd drive from one impoverished outpost to the next—wherever programs had been seeded. Julie remembers hot, dusty rides through endless cotton fields "and we'd be singing! Singing the folk songs of the civil rights movement." She also recalls, she says, "seeing whole families transformed. I was only eight, but it was powerfully formative."

Now 53 and living in Philadelphia in a racially diverse, limited equity co-op building committed to affordable housing, Greenberg also sees as formative her exposure to her mother's mothering, the latter's independence from cultural norms, and her attitude about life choices.

"I got with my mother's milk that you 'live your priorities'—that was my mother's motto—and if you do that, you grow more and more into *yourself* as you get older.

"My mother modeled how to follow your heart and live by reasonable passions," Greenberg says. "I loved my childhood. I loved being part of a close pack of siblings. I loved the culture of my family; we enjoyed each other. And I got my love of motherhood from my own family's values—generations of educators who knew a ton about child development.

"As I thought about my vision for my life, mothering was an essential part. I felt that my mother's being a single mom had gone well; she was a wonderful mother. By the time I was in my mid-twenties, I had become passionate about wanting to be a single mom, too. It was a priority, a high, high value.

"I like partnering," Greenberg adds, "but I just didn't see it as a prerequisite to parenting. I would have done anything, anything—work in a five-and-ten, whatever I needed to do economically—to be able to raise a brood."

At 25, Greenberg applied to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, and she remembers being asked, during her interview, if she planned on having a family. It was the kind of question that the admissions committee had started asking in an effort to suss out the unduly flaky; there was concern that the student body was listing towards the fringe.

"My answer was 'yes, definitely,'" Greenberg says, chuckling, "but of course I knew, and they didn't, that their idea of a family and my idea of a family had little in common. They were accepting someone whose norms were really, really different."

In her first or second year at R.R.C., Greenberg began looking for a sperm donor. "Kids like to know where they come from," she says, plainspoken. "It's better. So I preferred the path of a known

ART PROJECT IN SYNAGOGUE COURTESY OF JUDI GRITZBERG AND JENIFER HANSON

donor to an unknown one, but it was important that it not be someone who could threaten me, as a mother, in a patriarchal court system."

Her lover at the time was married to an older man—a well-known rabbi with grown kids. (It was an open marriage.) "She said to me, 'Why don't you ask _____ to be your donor?'" Greenberg relates. "He was fertile, healthy, with good genes, beauty, brains. He lived a few blocks away; I was close to him. He was a Holocaust survivor and he immediately understood: 'This is life! Yes!' he said, when I asked him. It was a primal response. We didn't discuss logistics until later.

"I knew from the beginning that I would be the parent," Greenberg explains. "I would be responsible for executive management, funding, parenting. I didn't expect his participation, but he was welcome to participate as much as he wanted."

Once pregnant, Greenberg ran into opposition from the board at the synagogue where she worked as Education Director. "I was considered an unwed mother. They had never heard of anything like me," she says. "They had a whole board meeting, should they fire me. But they had hired me to be an educator and I had done a fabulous job, growing their brand-new Hebrew school from five students to over a hundred. They ended up giving me a baby stroller.

"People have a straight and narrow idea of what a life is supposed to look like," Greenberg says. "To me, my choices seemed normal." She had no doubt that they were responsible.

Rosi was born in 1987, and Greenberg fairly immediately got in gear for her second—her mother, after all, had had four children under the age of four. Her sperm donor's extensive travel commitments, though, made optimally-timed inseminations difficult, and he eventually made a *shiddukh* to someone else—a rabbinical student of his, someone who had also survived the Holocaust, but as a toddler.

"Jack immediately got it, too," Greenberg says. "Life! This wasn't like other sperm donors I'd heard about who go to an agonizing place: *'What will the child think?' 'I don't know if I can stay uninvolved.' 'I will want to parent.'* My sperm donors didn't agonize about any of this. Neither did I."

Because Greenberg's second donor was younger and more open to parenting, Greenberg protected her parental rights by legally buying her donor's sperm under the auspices of a doctor. She gave birth to Raffi when Rosi was two. Then she used Jack's sperm again, and twenty months later had Zoe.

"My donors have been extraordinary," Greenberg says. "It's been the best it could possibly be; it couldn't have been better. They were both wonderful, wonderful donors. The kids have relationships with these people, but in no way were they Daddies. They would send Hanukkah and birthday presents; they'd visit, they'd call. Little things. The kids felt cared about."

"My kids didn't have angst about their donors—having a donor was normal for them."

Meanwhile, Greenberg had become romantically involved with Rebecca, a divorced woman with two children who lived four blocks away. The relationship lasted four years, but then foundered over incompatible visions of their future. Rebecca saw herself as moving out of her role as parent; Greenberg saw herself as just warming to the task. "There was hurt and anger," she says. "We were at different stages of the parenting journey.

"But we were all very close and we remain so," Greenberg explains. "I was a significant person to Rebecca's kids and she was and is significant to mine. But we were not," she says, flashing her underlying clarity of role, "parents to each other's kids."

When asked how she thinks the shifting *dramatis personae* in her romantic life—as well as the casually defined role of her children's donors—has affected her kids, Greenberg is sanguine. Well, more than sanguine…celebratory.

"I was in four significant relationships with women, and they remain my best friends to this day. Relationship stuff is about adding relationships; it's like building a web. An army of ex-lovers can never be defeated. I believe in building sustainable relationships. You've built all this love

Thirteen Ways of Looking at Good Mothering

"So many things make somebody a good mother. Unconditional love and commitment. Parenting from a steady state, being able to self-soothe, having your own centered confidence. Knowing who you are. Being yourself is good for kids to see—they become themselves. Noticing your individual child, being very present, tuning in to who they are. Having both high expectations and lots of flexibility. Expecting to be in a real relationship with your child where you respect them and you expect them to respect you. Problem-solving collaboratively.

"Finding a balance between being the leader and taking them into account so they feel heard and significant. Having kids feel like an important part of the whole.

"Giving kids meaningful chores. Really integrating them into the work of family life. Connecting them into doing good for the world, even at a young age. Putting lots of effort into finding them meaningful 'mitzvah work,' helping them see it has an impact. Connecting them to kinship networks, community networks. Embedding them in a place where they belong. Putting a lot of effort into keeping everyone connected—uncles, aunts, grandparents.

"Reaching out for wisdom and therapy when you need support. Finding the right resources for each child."

—JULIE GREENBERG

and care, it just goes through a transformation. The people you've loved are lovable.

"I wanted a big, close family where the kids could play with each other and have each other as a support system," Greenberg adds. "There is huge stability in our family. I'm the one parent in the house always, and we've always lived in this house. It wasn't disruptions. Same home, same mother. I was the one and only."

As for the sperm donors, Greenberg says, "The relationships have gone through different permutations. Both men have moved, but they are always a nice background presence in our lives. Rosi, Raffi and Zoe didn't have angst about their donors—having a donor was normal for them. They knew where they came from; that was huge, that settled the issue. None of them made much use of their donor relationships, but they were there. At times it was painful for my first three kids—when they looked at a hetero-normative family they felt different; young kids don't like to be different. What they minded was being *different*, not their lives."

Greenberg explains a maternal strategy. "I'd have conversations. 'Do you ever wonder what it would be like to have a dad living here?' I made the space. I didn't want to make anything taboo or impose a party line on them—'Rah, rah, this family is perfect.' I want them to live life, experience joy, sorrow, sadness, yearning, gratitude—all the different things.

"Having a dad in the house—or out—there are blessings and challenges. If you have a dad, you're pretty much stuck with that dad, whatever the match of temperament, personality, interests. Without a dad, you have a wider realm of who you choose as a mentor. Raffi went through a stage of missing having a dad in the house, as any kid would, going through mourning and longing. It was very fluid. I was able to be there for him as he moved through those feelings.

"I always had many males in Raffi's life," Greenberg continues. "Grownup versions of his own possibilities. The blessing is that Raffi was able to choose a mentor who is a dear, dear, beloved family friend. He ended up choosing an ideal man—ideal for Raffi—to pattern himself after. Michael and Raffi had an affinity; they shared interests. Raffi had huge respect for Michael, for who he was as a person. And Michael took Raffi on. From age nine through his adolescence, Raffi would go up to Boston to be with him for a week. They'd go to the US Open, they'd talk on the phone, he'd consult Michael on sports and romantic issues; they had passionate conversations. Raffi was in Michael's wedding party. He was the perfect person for Raffi and a better match than his genetic forebear."

After her romantic relationship with Rebecca ended, Greenberg found a third sperm donor, but he lived four hours away. "He'd drive two hours. I'd do the same. We'd meet in a cornfield in this beautiful place, under a full moon. My cycle happened to coincide with the full moon," Greenberg says. "We kept trying and trying. I finally got pregnant, but had a miscarriage at three-plus months. It felt tragic, very, very tragic to lose that kid."

The College Essay You Write When Your Mom's Super-Unconventional

Three of Julie Greenberg's children are currently in college (Brown, Yale, Yale—can you believe it?), and their college essays were each about their mother's extraordinary single-parenting and rich, wildly unconventional household. Here, slightly abridged, is **ZOE GREENBERG**'s essay:

"We realized how frail a word is when faced with the thing it names." —Julia Alvarez

My mom decided to be a single mother, and she never does anything half-heartedly. She had my two older siblings and me with donor dads, but she wasn't done yet. She adopted my youngest two siblings from Guatemala and we became a big, multi-racial family. Every week on the Jewish Sabbath, my mom lights the candles and sends prayers to "all the people who helped make this family," which includes a long list of Spanish and English names.

The six of us live in a cooperative apartment building, committed to racial and economic diversity. We have become masters at using space creatively, because we all share a three-bedroom apartment, and we can't waste an inch. We keep our hermit crab and turtle in our non-working fireplace in the living room, and we store luggage in a shower stall.

Although we don't have a lot of physical room, I value the abundant space for human relationships: the late-night ethical discussions, the political debates at the dining room table, and the imaginative problem-solving in family meetings.

My family doesn't end at our apartment door. When I was about six, my mom chose a "parenting partner"—a gay man named Dove—who has been my "father figure" for the past eleven years. My little siblings call him Dad, but my older siblings and I are stuck grasping for words.

"He's my Dad-like figure," I said for a while, but people looked at me quizzically.

"He's family," I'd say, but they wanted to know how.

"This is my Dove," I finally said, which says both everything and nothing.

I've learned from my family that there are so many happy ways to lead a life. I can't always explain how everyone's related to me, but I've realized that what's most important goes beyond words. I am so proud to be a part of this lifelong, loving, un-nameable family.

Julie & Zoe at Zoe's high school graduation, 2009.

The miscarriage, though, opened a new door for Greenberg: adoption. "I thought, 'This is another great path. I need to do it.' It's a different path. I was full-force ahead. Joey [Jonah] was born in 1996. He's from Guatemala. We have the names of his birth parents. I spent a day with the birth mother, but the social worker—our middle person—died, and we lost all connection."

In 2000, Greenberg adopted a second child, Mozi [Mozelle], also from Guatemala, from an orphanage for babies. "I was lucky to get her at three-and-a-half months," Greenberg says.

"The trajectory and profile, emotionally, of adopted kids is very different because you have a huge loss of your connection with your own birth parents and culture," Greenberg explains. "That's huge. Joey has a great life. He's incredibly good at handling this, but it's definitely painful. And adoption can feel more stigmatizing; that's bigger to deal with, too.

"Every time we light Shabbat candles, I send light to all the people who helped start this family. I say the names—Marta Eliza and Jose Lopez, Orbelina del Carmen Rivera, _____, and Jack. And we send lots of light out. I came up with this as a way of normalizing the family structure," says Greenberg, "and of bringing all of who we are into our precious ritual moments.

"When Joey and Mozi came into the family we became multi-racial," she adds. "I'm grateful to live at a time when the Jewish community is opening up to more diversity. It makes it possible to raise a Jewish family, though there's still a lot of work to be done."

This summer, the whole Greenberg clan is traveling to Guatemala. As usual, Greenberg's attitude is both gimlet-eyed and improvisatory. "We'll learn some Spanish, get a feel for the birth-land, spend time in the places I stayed when I got Joey and Mozi. We're all very, very excited. We'll see what emerges…."

Understanding that her two adopted children would have to metabolize both loss and a more complex and intensive experience of 'being different' than was the case with her biological kids, Greenberg decided that the resource she needed was something called a dad. "I was open to that," she says. (Finding the right resource to match each child is core for her; she enrolled Raffi, for example, in an all-boys' school. "He was my first boy-child and I freaked out," she says. "I put him in a school where I felt partnered in raising him. I had a team; they were the best of the best.") A friend of Greenberg's—a "celibate gay male" named Dove, whom Greenberg neologized as a "parenting partner"—formally became the "Dad" in 2000. He lived three blocks away.

"We didn't know what we were doing," Greenberg says about the early days of the arrangement. "I'd been in many relationships with women. It was shocking to be partnering with this gay man. The family boundaries grew and changed, there were huge challenges and obstacles. It wasn't easy sailing.

"Our agreement was that I would be the primary parent in terms of funding, nurturing and decision-making, but Joey and Mozi would call him Daddy. You say, 'Mommy and Daddy,' it means something very deep. We both grew into primary parents in the hearts of the youngest two kids, and our roles got more flexible. It evolved organically. Dove is very involved in the kids' lives; he'll buy them shoes, groceries. We have family dinners now and then. He's a wonderful, wonderful dad, a beloved family member. We now co-parent seamlessly. I'm really really proud of what we built together."

As a part-time rabbi and part-time family therapist (Greenberg went back to school and became licensed as a Marriage and Family Therapist), Greenberg's single-parent income has required familial sacrifices, but the clan has consistently risen to the occasion of living modestly. The apartment is inarguably sardine-tight for six people—there's a "bed-chamber" for two built into the dining room which also functions as the playroom and harbors the washer and dryer—but the apartment is also immaculate and army-barracks organized.

"I'm an optimist when it comes to life," Greenberg says. "I was willing to live simply. A byproduct of my choices has been giving up financial rewards. I will never have status or economic clout in my neighborhood, and I produce programs in the Jewish community that I can't afford to go to. I will never be in a certain inner circle. But you know what?" she says cheerfully, "I don't care."

A standard source of financial anxiety for many middle-class Jewish families is the specter of college tuition. How to afford it? In Greenberg's case that will

"I'd always been in relationships with women. It was shocking to be partnering with this gay man."

From left: Dove, Mozi, Zoe, Rosi, Joey, Raffi and Julie.

get multiplied by five. But so far, to paraphrase a dreydl, "a big miracle happened in New Haven." Raffi got into Yale on a full scholarship, followed by Zoe doing likewise. Rosi, at Brown, had a full scholarship for two years and took out loans for the other two. Joey and Mozi are not college-bound yet, but it will probably work out. Their mother's an optimist.

When asked what she has learned through 22 years of unconventionally mothering a brood of five, Greenberg grows pensive.

"My worldview seems so normal to me, I hardly remember that to others it isn't. In the early years, I did feel that I had to defend my choices, that everything had to be perfect because it was so alternative. But I grew into relaxing about that. I stopped feeling any need to hide or minimize problems. I came to a deeper place of trust because everything was going great, there was nothing that needed to be defended or marketed. I saw that a lot of people's lives are less conventional than they look on the surface.

"I've always had huge confidence as a mom, much more than about partnering. Some of my kids would have liked the model of physical affection between two heterosexual partners, of a long-term commitment of two adults in their own home. But I was able to give them a different blessing: You can be completely fine in yourself and your life. It's not necessary to have a partner; you can be whole and happy as yourself. When I look at the world, a lot of kids never learned that message; they are seeking their other half. That is not the life I've modeled for my kids.

"I have pride about what I could give my children. In a life, there are always things that are there and things that aren't. Some have a spiritual life, some don't. Some have a sexual life, some don't. Some have a dog, some don't. You find what fits for you—it might not be optimal for your kid.

"But they're resilient, they're fine. We can hold it all—the hard emotions. It will be okay. You'll get through it.

"As a therapist, I know that liberation—from your own mental constructs, from what is possible—is a part of the work. There are bigger worlds to open.

"What's possible is always way bigger than what you think." ■

Customizing Motherhood

SUSAN SCHNUR *talks with kind-of-single mother* JENIFER FIRESTONE

Jenifer Firestone coordinated an alternative insemination program at a community health center in Boston for seven years. She also founded and ran a non-profit that, among other services, organized supportive programs for children of lesbian, gay and transgender parents. Professionally, she has been involved in the adoption or conception of over 1000 children. She is the mother of Hannah, 16, whom she co-parents with two gay men.

How did you come up with your unusual parenting arrangement?

Well, in 1988 I went through a divorce that was cataclysmic, and I thought, "I never want a kid to see me in this horribly fragile condition." I vowed not to have a child with a romantic partner. I also believe that more parents is better. Having only one parent can be terrifying for some children. When I was a kid it was so helpful to have a stable family with all these aunts and uncles and people whom I didn't even know *weren't* related by blood until I was older. If a child has more parents, she has more friends-of-parents, more relatives-of-parents. It's a good-for-everybody experience.

I also live with economic insecurity, and I did not want a child to have to share that. And I'm strongly self-aware, so I knew I had to compensate for my weaknesses—I'm someone who goes radically up and down emotionally. Feelings are just not always functional. Rick and Robb, Hannah's dads, are very even-keeled, very stable; they just celebrated their 20th anniversary.

Did family and friends support your decision to share parenting with two men?

"Maternal sacrifice" is a cultural doctrine, so the idea that I was systematically arranging to share parenting fifty-fifty with two men in another household was sacrilege. That I was saying, "Well, I want child-free time for myself—to date, to write, to nurture friendships, to enjoy some solitude..." Refusing to be a full-time mom, even expressing this wish, is very very taboo.

Also, in the 1990s, it was hard for most lesbians and feminists to fathom why a mother would willingly "share control" of her child—and with two men!

[Customizing Motherhood continued...] Didn't I want to make all the decisions myself? Actually, no. I hate making decisions on my own.

What does it take to make something like this work?

You have to recognize the riskiness and be appropriately cautious. We wrote a 35-page document over two years that addressed every single issue—that Hannah would be raised Jewish (Robb and Rick are non-practicing Catholics), to financial logistics, to parenting schedules. You have to be willing to engage in an insane process.

You also have to believe that when you're clear about what you want and why—and you have good goals—you can figure out a way to do everything. The answers are generally outside the box, I believe. "Creative problem-solving" has to excite you. It excites me. It also creates problems in my life.

Tell me about the Jewish part.

Hannah's baby naming was in my sister's backyard with over 100 friends and relatives, a rabbi, and the two non-Jewish fathers. My father good-naturedly asked if he should introduce Rick and Robb as his sons-in-law. I said, "No. They're Hannah's dads." We just didn't have the words.

Her bat mitzvah has been our crowning family experience. We brought 227 people together, and it was the first time Hannah's three extended families met. Robb's Catholic father, in his 80s—who had a hard time accepting his gay son and his son's family—came from Nebraska, and everyone stood with us queer parents to pass the Torah down to this child who had brought us all together. I felt enormous gratitude.

I've worked hard to raise Hannah Jewish. My synagogue has raised her in a way I couldn't have done myself—in terms of my literacy. It's magnificent to me. At 16, she's still in school at the shul and involved in social activism.

What has it been like to do things so differently?

As a teenager, feminism gave me an eye for social injustice. The people I admired

Express Male: *When Sperm Donation Gets Emotional*

by AVI LEVINSON*

My story as a sperm donor started with a phone call and ended with a marriage.

At the time, I was in my mid-fifties, living in New York with my long-time girlfriend, Rena; I had long been ambivalent about marriage. The phone call was from a young lesbian couple in Seattle whom I knew well because one of them, Leigh, had lived with my brother's family after graduating from college. During that time, Leigh met Sara, her partner-to-be. My extended family attended the young women's wedding, and in the years that followed we remained close.

Time passed. Leigh and Sara finished professional schools, started careers, and were ready to start a family. They wanted their sperm donor to be someone they knew and cared about, to be someone who would be in their child's life, but in a very circumscribed way. The process of vetting possible donors, necessarily a complicated and cautious one, took several years. In the end, they chose me. All the reasons I thought I was an unlikely candidate—I was twenty-plus years older than they, I lived 3000 miles away, my girlfriend and I did not have children—paradoxically made me attractive. Leigh and Sara didn't want a young, vigorous "Daddy figure" who might compete to be a parent, nor someone living nearby who might be intrusive, nor the complexity of potential half-siblings. I am a short, Jewish guy with glasses, so they could not exactly count on their kid looking like a movie star. But they picked me.

The experience of sperm donation was profound, stirring up fantasies from the trivial to the life-changing.

Rena and I took long walks to discuss this idea: that my semen would go to another woman, that I might become the biological parent of another family's infant—that, actually, I told Rena, I was going to do this no matter what. This was a huge thing to ask her to understand, but she gradually realized how much I wanted to be part of a generational cycle, and that this was probably my last chance.

Rena loves kids, but she had never seen herself as a mother. Over time, she became completely supportive. She even started to feel that entering this set of relationships would enhance our own life together. It was interesting, even funny, to experience how much daydreams played into our developing understanding. For instance, picturing how we would fly out to Seattle for birthdays and gatherings as part of the little family's extended *mishpacha*. We even imagined whether it would feel right to have the baby's picture in a little frame on our shelf. What would we do when somebody asked, "Oh, whose baby is *this*?" These imaginings made the process, and our roles in it, feel more real.

The moms-to-be and I drew up a contract (that dealt with finances, insurance, guardianship, etc.), using a lawyer whose specialty was gay and lesbian issues. Most important, the contract made clear that Leigh and Sara had *all* the parental rights, while I—though biologically a parent—had none. (Our shared

*All names in this article have been changed to protect privacy.

were feminists who saw the glaring problems with the status quo. I came out as a lesbian in 1979. I was 24. Once you do that, having a conventional life is no longer an option. I never identified with convention.

I have an ethic of justice that makes me empathic to children's experience, that makes me look at things radically differently. What has driven me most crazy is when gay parents think, "We'll have kids and then we'll be like everyone else" — as though being different is a problem. But most kids *are* different in some way; it's better to have kids who can embrace and value that, instead of trying to adapt to some perception of a norm that isn't — in and of itself — better.

Hannah's first Hanukkah with Rick, Robb and Jenifer. Jenifer notes: "If you cover up me, this photo looks like a gay male couple and their kid. If you cover up Rick, it looks like a straight couple and their kid."

For Hannah, "being different" is a positive value — I'm relieved about this. She has three very different families; she grew up going to Gay Pride parades; our friends are unconventional. Being different opens up the world to you — you can do and be anything.

I would not use the word "confident" to describe myself. I second-guess; I fight my demons. But I do have immense confidence that there are lots and lots of different ways to do things. ■

[*Jenifer and Hannah Firestone both describe their experiences in* And Baby Makes More: Known Donors, Queer Parents, and Our Unexpected Families, *edited by Susan Goldberg and Chloe Brushwood Rose.*]

fear was that we liked one another perhaps too much, running the risk of emotional entanglement once a child was born.) The plan was that I would be a nurturing-older-uncle type or even grandfather figure who lived far away, who was definitely not a father. We made this quite concrete, specifying, for example, that Leigh and Sara would have control of the baby's name, and that inseminations would be done only at the fertility clinic.

What followed were almost two years of monthly semen donations and fertility treatments with Sara. This meant that when her cycle was at its optimal point, I would get called out of my office or away from a dinner and leave instantly for the airport. This was in such contrast to my usual highly routinized life — and work ethic — that I felt like a secret agent being summoned on a mission. Once I did a round-trip in one day, only to get a call the next day to fly back — which I did. It was stressful, but exciting.

Emotionally, the experience of sperm donation was profound, stirring up fantasies from the trivial to the life-changing. I pictured a future of flying in to fill the role of the beloved old relative, with hugs and kisses all around, and then departing with smiles, leaving the annoying tasks of actual child-rearing to the parents. I imagined getting school photos, attending a bar or bat mitzvah, a wedding. On a deeper level, I felt pulses of almost physical gratitude that I had been given a chance to have a biological, personal connection to the next generation.

Month by month, I would inseminate, fly home, and then anxiously wait for a phone call. I researched the odds and made up tables of probability calculations to try to stay anchored — and, well, to have something to *do* — as I held my breath.

We produced embryos and even brief pregnancies, but, sadly, they were never successful. Finally, as Sara's fortieth birthday approached, the women decided to stop trying with Sara and instead switch to Leigh, who was four years younger. To me it felt vaguely polygamous to go from one woman to the next — I was Sara's donor, not Leigh's; it felt wrong to have such emotional and biological intimacy with a second woman. I was also, at this point, emotionally exhausted. I know that my thinking was scientifically and logically irrational, but affectively things were clear.

When the whirlwind stopped, we all dispatched letters and e-mails reflecting on the stress, the waiting, the medical procedures, the anxiety, and also our very amplified affection. We talked about grief and disappointment, and the wistfulness of dreams that are not to be. At the same time, we shared a sense of closure, and, for me, in any case, a heartening feeling that at least there had been embryos and pregnancies. Even this, for me, had an emotional and spiritual value.

After a period of Sara's mourning, Leigh and Sara decided on an anonymous donor. It was successful, and today they have a cheerful little preschooler. I visit them about once a year.

The end of the story is that after my sperm-donor role was over, I felt empty, lonely and isolated — especially as I compared myself to Leigh and Sara as they started their new, young family. I also found myself feeling differently towards Rena. I wanted — needed — solidity after feeling so airborne, both literally and emotionally, for over two years. She had supported me in an emotionally risky proposition — that I might create a child with someone else — and I felt profoundly grateful.

I soon proposed marriage to Rena in a coffee shop, and we were quickly married in a big ceremony with all the trimmings. Our marriage enhanced *all* of Rena's and my relationships — with each other, with friends, and with family. But the most important thing is that I myself felt more real and substantial, not just the guy who runs to the airport largely for the sake of somebody else's intimacy and happiness. ■

REVIEWS

French Connection

Uncovering dark histories

Yellow star, burning bright…

"The girl was the first to hear the loud pounding on the door…. 'Open up immediately. Police!' " The morning raid by the French police in Nazi-occupied Paris on July 16, 1942 is the wrenching event at the heart of the popular novel ***Sarah's Key***, by **Tatiana de Rosnay** (St. Martin's Press, paperback, $13.95). On that fateful morning, French police began rounding up thousands of Jewish men, women, and children. They were taken to the Vel d'Hiv sports arena, given hardly any food or water for several days, then shipped to barracks outside the city. There, armed guards separated husbands and wives. The children were "bludgeoned, beaten," and torn from their parents. This was a mere preamble to the gas chambers of Auschwitz where 73,000 Jews deported from France were murdered, among them 11,000 children.

Sixty years later, Julia Jarmond, an American journalist living in Paris, is assigned to cover the official commemoration. As she researches what happened to the victims, she comes to suspect that her French husband's family somehow knew the frightened girl we meet in that first sentence.

At first, the book is spliced into chapters alternating between the wartime ordeal of the 10-year-old Sarah and Julia's unrelenting quest to find out what happened. In the process, Julia's life comes undone as she discovers that her Paris apartment was once occupied by Sarah and her family. As Julia discovers, Sarah managed to escape her torturers that summer of 1942 and return home, only to make a gruesome discovery.

Meanwhile, Julia's emotional roller coaster goes into high gear as she bumps against a diffident husband and the stony silence of her in-laws. "The French were closed up like clams. Nothing must be shown. Nothing must be revealed. Everything was to remain unruffled, undisturbed. That's how it was. How it had always been."

It's a sad comment that the majority of the population remained indifferent to the fate of the Jews in their midst. Nevertheless, individual French people risked their lives to rescue the hunted, especially children who, from age six on, had to wear the infamous yellow star. De Rosnay allows these selfless characters to shine. (This reviewer owes her life to the courage of one of them. After the Nazi occupation ended, my own parents and baby sister did not return from the death camps. I was hidden by a French family.)

Translated into 32 languages, *Sarah's Key* has, not surprisingly, landed in Hollywood with Kirstin Scott-Thomas in the lead role. At times, the novel does read like a movie script, taking its heroine around Paris, then to Tuscany and New York, places where directors and cameras love to linger. Ironically, last September, invited to the U.S. to advise the filmmaker, de Rosnay was temporarily denied a passport. French officials insisted that she was not "totally French" and would have to submit documents proving she was. No pounding on doors, however. That belongs to the past, *n'est-ce pas*?

CLAUDIA Z. CARLIN

Jewish Jane Austen

A classic novel, reimagined

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen begins with a comedic negotiation between husband and wife about what share of his recently deceased father's estate he should bestow upon his otherwise penniless stepmother and step-sisters. With ***The Three Weissmanns of Westport*** (FSG, $25), **Catherine Schine** brings this scene forward two hundred years, reenacted by a seventy-eight year old man and his young mistress discussing the terms of the divorce the husband will negotiate with his wife of forty-eight years. And thus Schine commences her own diverting yet trenchant observations of a present-day family of Jewish New Yorkers with the kind of knowing, alternately sympathetic and mocking detail expected of all Austen imitators.

The three abandoned women are Betty Weissmann, a seventy-five year-old homemaker, and her middle-aged daughters Annie, a solitary librarian with two grown sons, and Miranda, a literary agent being sued into bankruptcy; their savior is Cousin Lou, a wealthy, big-hearted man orphaned by the Holocaust who offers them his ramshackle beach house in Westport when Betty's husband's mistress convinces Mr. Weissmann to force her out of their apartment. Once this "Joad family" embarks upon their "neo-Depression life," Betty ostentatiously mourns her very much alive husband, Annie pines for the brother of the woman she doesn't yet know to be "the irreconcilable difference" that wrecked her mother's marriage, and Miranda falls for a divorced younger man with a young son. All of the characters and situations of *Sense and Sensibility* are thus reassuringly present and cleverly updated.

And yet, Schine reminds us early on that we are in a much meaner world than Austen's genteel society. Cousin Lou's frequently recurring story about the anti-Semitic WASP who helped sink the Congressional bill that would have rescued many more European refugee children like him reminds the reader that for all

the inheritance laws and class differences that circumscribed the lives of Austen's heroines, they never had to deal with divorce and bankruptcy lawyers, forensic accountants, faked pregnancies, compulsive liars, and even Merkin-like swindlers. The prosperity of the Weissmanns and their Jewish friends and neighbors represents the overthrow of the old order, but so does this general lack of boundaries, or even the veneer of politesse.

Schine embraces her modern setting in its entirety, and her story is all the more satisfying because she is unafraid to follow her characters and their situations where they naturally want to go, even when they depart from the source—most especially with the women's suitors. By being less true to the original narrative, Schine is more faithful to the spirit of Austen.

Ultimately, it's Schine's mature heroines, in sharp contrast to their young predecessors, who form the key revelation of this adaptation. These seasoned women, embarking on second and third chapters of their lives, ultimately demonstrate independence and resilience that are a far cry from what Austen's time afforded. Annie, Miranda, and Betty want partners, but ultimately don't require them for survival. Their renaissance is thrillingly on their own terms.

TAMMY HEPPS

Atypical (Dis)believers

What does God have to do with it?

I was reading **Rebecca Newberger Goldstein**'s *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* (Pantheon, $27.95) on a train; the man next to me, noticing the title, asked me if the book was "convincing me." The answer, ultimately, is no—the book could just as easily (and perhaps more aptly) be called *36 Arguments Against the Existence of God*. But like most good novels, despite its title (and all the arguments within it, and there are many), it's not trying to make me pick a side.

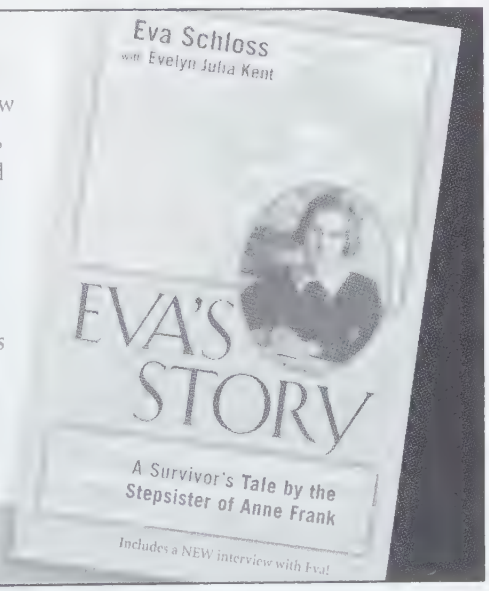
I don't know anything about Goldstein's religious proclivities, but I suspect that she is, as her main character Cass Seltzer is labeled by Time magazine, "an atheist with a soul." Seltzer is a professor of the psychology of religion and the author of a book called *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*. His book, intended to show "how irrelevant the belief in God can be to religious experience," sports an appendix (attached to the novel as well) of 36 arguments for God that Seltzer dismantles one by one, and has catapulted him into a position of fame that he does not quite know how to occupy. Seltzer's success derives in part from being declared the only one of the "new atheists" (the crop of anti-God arguers appearing just after 9/11) who "seems to have any idea of what it feels like to be a believer." And Goldstein, while she most closely inhabits Seltzer, also manages to describe a synagogue full of fervent Orthodox Jews with a depth of feeling that can only come from someone respectful (and observant) of what faith does for a life, a community, and our world.

The book jumps through time between two main story lines, one dealing with the present and one with the past, when Seltzer was in graduate school, studying with an eccentric mentor named Jonah Elijah Klapper. Klapper threatens to hijack the book, and never became a very believable character for me, but he does lead Cass into the world of a Hasidic community in upstate New York

This Jewish Joad family embarks upon a "neo-Depression life."

Many know the tragic story of Anne Frank, the teen whose life ended in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. But most people don't know about Eva Schloss, Anne's playmate and posthumous stepsister. Though Eva, like Anne, was imprisoned in Auschwitz at the age of 15, her story did not end there. She survived the prison camps, but it would be decades before Eva was able to tell her survivor's tale.

"A tale worth telling. . . . It picks up where Anne Frank's diary ends."
— *New York Daily News*


Eva Schloss
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A Survivor's Tale by the Stepsister of Anne Frank
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called New Walden, which is where some of the most luminous moments of the novel take place. There Cass encounters a child genius, Azarya Sheiner, the son of the community's Rebbe, whose gifts bring him to have to decide whether to abandon his community in order to expand his mind, or sacrifice his gifts to remain with the people he loves. It was in Azarya's struggle that the questions of faith seemed to me the most clear, relatable, and interesting, and the philosophy came most to life.

It is a rare novel that takes on issues this grand, this crucial, and this hard to describe. The power of Goldstein's mind, while it may confound us at times, can really only be admired. In her very first chapter Cass Seltzer finds himself on a bridge overlooking the frozen Charles River in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the dead of winter and the middle of the night. In a beautiful meditation on sublimity and selfhood, Goldstein gets at what may be the most important question of all: "How can it be that, of all things, one is this thing, so that one can say, astonishingly—in the right frame of mind, it is astonishing, with the metaphysical chill blowing in from afar—'here I am'?"

NELLIE HERMANN

Bodies in the Bible

An incisive examination

Lori Hope Lefkovitz brings her own subversive feminist sensibility to ***In Scripture: The First Stories of Jewish Sexual Identities*** (Rowman & Littlefield, $49.95) where she proposes to apply psychoanalytic and gender theory to selected biblical narratives from Genesis to the Book of Ruth. Her goal is to look at "a set of first stories particularly for their power to have set in motion definitions of the body, the sexual body, and the Jewish sexual body that developed over time."

The questions Lefkovitz asks and the categories she proposes to consider are challenging and stimulating. In stunning balletic leaps, each of the nine chapters begins with a summary of a biblical episode, then arcs through feminist and gender theory as well as rabbinic exegesis, ultimately touching down in the midst of contemporary culture.

Lefkovitz is both sharp and playful in her application of a variety of post-modern gender theories in each of the chapters. In accessible language, she explains such potentially difficult ideas as the semiotics of linguistic classification, French feminist theory, Queer theory and the idea of fluid gender identity, comparative cultural norms and counter-cultural traditions, among others, and skillfully applies them to her selected biblical texts. Readers who are curious about these contemporary concepts will find clear and useful introductions in these pages.

The reading strategy she employs is "unorthodox, moving both forward from the Bible to later Western stereotypes... and backward, presuming that readings that seem inevitable today are a consequence of ...truths that have been put in place over the millennia between biblical time and the present." She views this strategy as a way of challenging our concept of what is natural, including definitions of sexuality and ethnicity. Yet, on occasion, Lefkovitz unaccountably fails to question these most basic gender assumptions, in spite of her goal of subverting accepted readings of these stories. For example, in discussing gender identities in the creation stories of Genesis, Lefkovitz assumes that the snake is male, applying the Western Freudian equivalent of snake as phallus, even though, in its cultural context in the ancient Near East, the snake is a symbol of water and is associated with the female principle; Tiamat, the Mesopotamian mother goddess, is a serpent. Lefkovitz also reads both God and Adam as male, even though God is only grammatically male in the Bible—the Divine sexual gender itself is purposely indeterminate.

Lefkovitz, a professor of Gender and Judaism at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, writes in a readable, personable prose, underpinned by sound scholarship, as the solid and informative endnotes testify. This book will shake up many assumptions, as it cuts a wide swath through biblical, rabbinic, and Western cultures, applying a range of gender theories in surprising ways.

DIANE M. SHARON

Lefkovitz challenges our concept of what is natural, including definitions of sexuality and ethnicity.

Cold Comfort

Contending with inexplicable tragedy

The novel ***Happy Now?*** by **Katherine Shonk** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $25) is a compelling exploration of a young woman's response to her husband's suicide.

Set during the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, this suspenseful feminist novel of history and magic offers a long awaited reinterpretation of the Prophet Huldah.

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For their first wedding anniversary, 36-year-old Claire Kessler created a painting for her husband, hoping to "tell him a story about their marriage:" "glossy contentment on the surface, with something darker and sadder underneath." Beginning with a sepia-toned image of an old record store, she sealed the first layer of paint with clear lacquer, then covered it with a picture of a flower shop to suggest a fantasy of the world as "a peaceful, sunny place where people wanted for nothing."

Yet the Chicago that serves as the backdrop for Katherine Shonk's short, piercing first novel, *Happy Now?*, is anything but "a peaceful, sunny place." Not long after their first anniversary, Jay jumped to his death at a Valentine's Day party. The novel begins as Claire moves into her pregnant sister's guesthouse to grieve, to escape, and ultimately to begin to heal. Snow shrouds the ground and clouds the air during the month or so of the novel's main action; in the flashbacks that fill in the backstory, it is also often cold and snowy. A muffled chill permeates every aspect of Claire's tale. Communication, even between intimates, is halting and frozen; emotion struggles to surface in this world that offers little assurance of safety or warmth. And the process of layering (or is it hiding?)—covering one reality with another—is a central aspect of Claire's life as an artist and as a daughter, sister, friend, and spouse.

Claire is a disturbingly familiar contemporary character, a competent, independent woman with a successful career who, at 31, had never had a relationship that lasted more than a year. After three years of valiantly trying JDate and eHarmony and even speed dating, she met Jay, an "odd, ardent, open" man who quickly fell in love with her and whom she allowed herself to love as well. Although Jay was frequently paralyzed by disturbing periods of depression, Claire married him in the belief that what she called his "spells" would somehow abate.

Perhaps because Claire never fully understands Jay, the reader, too, is baffled by his character. What was the source of his depression? Why did he choose to end his life so dramatically? We never really know; Jay remains a mystery, a never fully realized figure. Yet as Claire works to understand *herself* in the painful and often chaotic days after the "incident," we come to see deeply into the lives of an appealing, realistic group of imperfect characters struggling to make do in a world that does not correspond to their dreams.

Suffused with black humor and mordant wit, set in a contemporary cultural landscape replete with Starbucks lattes and Pottery Barn furnishings, *Happy Now?* takes its readers on a surprising, unsentimental journey into the heart of one woman learning, finally, to be both vulnerable and strong. It is a journey we might all wish to emulate.

JOYCE ZONANA

She resolved to subordinate her own art to steady her neurotic, frustrated spouse.

The Other Roth

An American classic, discovered

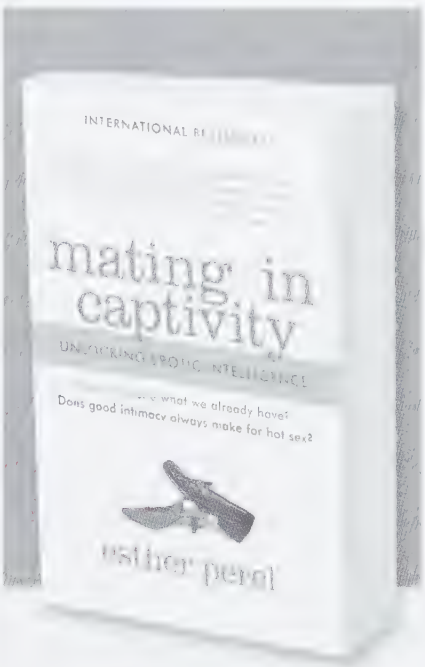
Even aficionados of Jewish American literature may be surprised to be reminded of **Henry Roth**. Living a full generation before that more familiar Roth, Philip, Henry's best known work is the novel *Call it Sleep*, a critically acclaimed work published 1934 that soon disappeared, only to be revived in paperback in the 1960's, thanks to Irving Howe's insistence, in The New York Times Book Review. *Call it Sleep* went on to sell a million copies.

When Henry Roth died in 1995, he left 2,000 pages of unpublished work. From out of that treasure trove, a former fiction editor of The New Yorker, Willing Davidson, edited ***An American Type*** (W.W. Norton & Company, $25.95), perhaps one of the

Erotic Intelligence

"[Perel's] writing is fresh and provocative, in a class by itself."

—Janis Abrahms Spring, Ph.D., author of *After the Affair*



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HARPER

last eyewitness testimonies to the horrors of the Great Depression and a rambling account of monumental writer's block, well- or not-so-well-meaning friends, and an undying love.

Readers who loved *Call it Sleep*—an impressionistic, terrifying yet lyrical account of six years in the life of a Jewish immigrant boy—may find *An American Type* a very different sort of novel. A scarcely disguised stand-in for Roth himself, protagonist Ira Stigman, stigmatized by his immigrant East-Side roots, interacts with a number of American types throughout the novel, as he himself attempts to discover just what that designation means to them and to him. Shades of Gatsby!

Ira is woefully dependent on Edith, his mentor and financial supporter. Significantly older than he, she has introduced him to a world of glitterati in which he never feels worthy or secure. Ira's doctrinaire Communist friend, Bill, from whom he becomes increasingly alienated, is a constant reminder that his first book was scorned by the Left. "'If I could write, I'd be a better writer than you.' Bill raged. 'Youse can only write about that soft crap is the boojwasie. I'd be writin' about the workin' class, the revolutionary workin' class, an' what they done for Russia.'" Only the gifted composer and pianist who marries him, the woman Ira calls "M," a self-sacrificing blueblood, seems to truly sustain him, and he can only revile himself for his unworthiness to love her.

Ira seems never to fit comfortably within any of these lives, intellectual, political and artistic. The privations of the Depression, delineated with almost obsessive attention to detail, only add emphasis to the inner deprivation he suffers. Ira says, "The way I feel now, it's as though what really counts—is the guy who can cope. You understand? The guy who can make his own way. I don't know what it's all about. Just what I'm not."

In the end, octogenarian Ira, looking back on his life, is finally affirmative about something. Of "M," now deceased, he says, "The artist in them had the power to tear them apart, as he had seen it do with other married couples. No, it was rather her determination to preserve their marriage that kept it intact, her resolution to subordinate her own art to the needs of spouse and family, to steady her neurotic, frustrated spouse and wholesomely rear their two sons." Feminists will find this statement a familiar and interesting assessment.

FAYE MOSKOWITZ

Our Reviewers

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[continued form page 15]

Another elegy, but this one totally cheerful, in honor of a larger-than-life uncle. We get a whole life story here, the good and the bad, the loudness and the food—and most of all the loving and generous heart. It is a poem that can teach us, too, to be generous. Some people might make fun of "Uncle Jack;" this poet celebrates him.

'AS IT IS SAID'

Elegy to Uncle Jack

by BONNIE MAURER

"What's goin' on around here?"
you boomed into our lake cottage
and the screen door slammed, the yolk sun
quivered in your *gas-house eggs*, ready
when we clamored down stairs.
You fried up the perch for lunch, liked
your ptcha made from gelatin and calves knuckles,
gefilte fish mixed from the carp
we caught with your licorice dough balls
rolled between our fingers at the pier.
Uncle Jack, you chewed on Cuban cigars
and I remember the odor of our cottage
when you were gone.

I only heard how you heaped your plates
with lox and bagels, silver herring
in cream, sturgeon
and smoked fish flecked gold.

Oldest of seven, you left the house
when your father's old-country ulcer
burst, married Estelle of the elegant
silver streak in her hair,
and left your four brothers
your striped pants and suspenders,
your mother and two sisters
depression glass and
short of cash.

Legend of the get-rich-quick
scheme, I was told, but
not like your brother,
"High Dollar Dave"—not allowed
in our house for good reason,
Mother said, who could talk
the pants off a deal and did
with cars and women,

who, so charismatic,
could cheat a person twice and did.

You pushed Avantis, fit wigs, swore by bracelets,
sold aloe vera you insisted we rub
into our palms as the new cure all,
plied us with your vitamin pills,
popping in our bellies
like Mexican jumping beans
as we ran for the school bus.

Peddler to the end,
you drove that broken-down blue Ford
selling table pads, and measured one
for me as a wedding gift, then drove
into our alley to inspect the vines.
Our garden gave up pudgy, ripe
tomatoes to your pull and pail.
As if I were a tomato as a teen
you wanted to squeeze me
and did: "Hello Dear,"
Your wet lips smushed
into mine.
I learned to duck
and dodge at a "ripe" age.

But Uncle Jack, how you crooned
"Embraceable You"
when the spoons chimed the glass
and your daughter kissed her bride
at her lesbian, Jewish wedding.
You stood up and sang even to be thought a fool
by your own brothers shaking their heads.

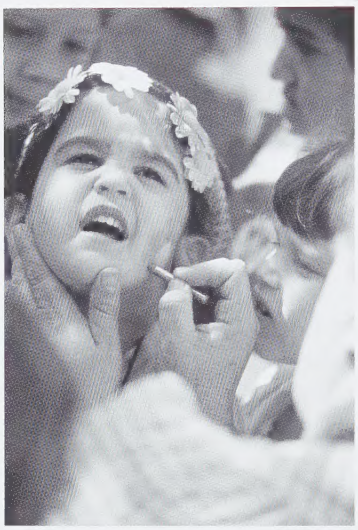
On High Holidays you sang
from one end of the temple row,
your younger brother from the other.
On a seesaw of notes,
I balanced in between.

As one of ten, at the morning minyan
you counted, as they did on your kitchen savvy
for lox & onion omelets and corn-beef hash.
Uncle Jack, you missed your calling:
ten recipes in the House-of-God cookbook!

Your prowess with knife and fork
renowned, you could eat the world
and you wanted to and did
until your belly grew like Succoh's moon.
Uncle Jack, what was starving in you?
What you craved might be the answer for us all.

"Hi Darling," you said
at the last Passover table, hardly able to see
through thick glasses and over
your belly, your Passover plates, circling them
around you like the Israelites encamped in the desert.
"Pass the horseradish, will you, Estelle," you said, never
missing a word, spooning the hot, rosy relish
on your plate of gefilte fish.
"Sh' ne' emar," you echoed your younger brother
singing at the other end of the table.
"Sh' ne' emar." "As it is said."

HAPPENING



Lox with Black Beans & Rice: Portraits of Cuban Jews in Florida

The contemporary Cuban-Jewish community in South Florida is portrayed in 30 large-scale photographs and narratives reflecting a rich diversity from all walks of life. 2010 marks 50 years since the summer of 1960 when there was a massive exodus from Cuba to Florida due to the communist revolution. Through September 5 at the Jewish Museum of Florida in Miami Beach. *jewishmuseum.com*

See Israeli Films Here!

Just launched at the JCC in Manhattan, the Israel Film Viewing Library at the Israel Film Center now hosts the most extensive collection of Israeli cinema in North America. You can watch—free—Israeli films and television shows for your own pleasure, for research or to scope out which ones to include in film festivals or other programs. This treasure trove is available by appointment Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 10 am to 4 pm, and viewings must be scheduled in advance. *israelfilmcenter.org*

Faces of Israel

What does it mean to live in a state that is both Jewish and democratic? A new film poses questions on such hot topics in Israel as civil unions, homosexuality and same-sex unions, the role of liberal branches of Judaism and the Israeli chief rabbinate. These questions are answered through interviews with Israelis ranging from openly gay, secular university students, to leaders in the Conservative movement to ultra-Orthodox Jews. Check out some of the footage at *Facesthemovie.com*.

All Rise

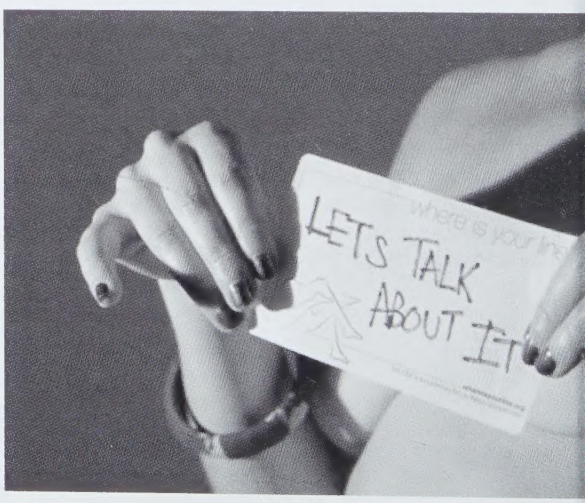
is artist Helene Aylon's imagined feminist court of Jewish law, the Beit Din. She has created a performance piece that addresses the patriarchal construction of a Jewish court. Aylon suggests one solution for the plight of the *aguna*, a "chained woman" who cannot escape her marriage if her husband denies her a Jewish divorce. If there were three *women* judges, posits Aylon, the aguna might have a chance to be heard. The installation is part of "Reinventing Ritual," an exhibition at the Contemporary Jewish Museum of San Francisco until October 3, 2010. On September 12, Aylon's work will spur a discussion with writer Ayelet Waldman, co-sponsored by the Jewish Women's Archive. *thecjm.org*

Asian Jewish Life

Jews living in Asia today are a tiny minority, usually unified by tradition and common contemporary concerns. Now they're also connected via a new, free quarterly periodical of Jewish Diaspora life throughout Asia. Asian Jewish Life, founded and edited by Erica Lyons, attempts to "promote unity while celebrating diverse backgrounds and customs." *asianjewishlife.org*

The Line

is a 24-minute documentary in which a rapist is confronted by his victim, who is also the director. Nancy Schwartzman's film is about a one-night stand in Jerusalem that goes terribly wrong. Told through a self-described "sex-positive" lens, the filmmaker, an American woman, confronts her Israeli attacker a few years later, recording the conversation with a hidden camera. In the film, sex workers, survivors and others are asked about the line defining consent, and discuss justice, accountability and "today's rape culture." *whereisyourline.org*



Curious George and Margret and H. A. Rey

It turns out that the incurably curious monkey, repeatedly getting into trouble, was not unlike his creators, the husband- and wife team who rode bicycles and narrowly escaped disaster in Europe during World War II. This exhibition, created at the Jewish Museum in New York and shown until August 1, *thejewishmuseum.org, will be shown from November 14, 2010 to March 13, 2011 at the C ontemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco.*

Become a Doula to Accompany and Comfort the Dying

We know about doulas who accompany pregnant women through childbirth. Now there is a program to train volunteers who provide companionship and comfort to people whose life expectancy is 18 months or less. Well-prepared doulas serve people who have limited support from family and friends, and provide emotional, spiritual and social support to one person at a time until the person dies. A training program from the Shira Ruskay Center requires a minimum commitment of 18 months after qualified volunteers complete a six-week program. *doula@shiraruskay.org*

Teen Dating Violence and Sex Ed

One in three adolescent girls in the US is a victim of physical, emotional, or verbal abuse from a dating partner, problems only compounded when young women do not have access to comprehensive, medically accurate, age-appropriate sex education. The National Council of Jewish Women is raising awareness about comprehensive sex education's critical role in eliminating teen dating violence. *http://action.ncjw.org/ncjw/join-forward.tcl*

Women in Judaism, online

Watch for the electronic publication of a new issue of Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal. The new issue features fiction, poetry, reviews and such articles as "Abraham, Sarah and Hagar as a Blended Family: Problems, Partings, and Possibilities." You can access the journal at *http://www.womeninjudaism.org.*

Shifting the Gaze: Painting and Feminism

Personal paintings by Eva Hesse, Audrey Flack, and Lee Lozano created at the dawn of a resurgent feminist position in postwar American art open an exhbit that includes pioneering feminist artists Ida Applebroog, Judy Chicago, Joyce Kozloff, Elaine Reichek, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Semmel, Joan Snyder, Nancy Spero and Hannah Wilke, who used diverse techniques, such as abstraction, photorealism, collage and embroidery to create new styles and directly confront taboos of sexual representation and discrimination. Extending to the present, paintings by Nicole Eisenman, Dana Frankfort and others target the representation of women in popular culture. The show will also include several male artists who create paintings that embody a feminist aesthetic. September 12, 2010–January 30, 2011 at the Jewish Museum in New York, *thejewishmuseum.org.*

For events and projects taking place between issues of Lilith, check out WHAT'S NEW at *Lilith.org*, and sign up for Lilith's free e-mail newsletter. Send suggestions for this section to *info@Lilith.org*

—compiled by Naomi Danis

Graphic Details: Confessional Comics by Jewish Women

This show is a real first—a museum exhibition which shows how women's "raw, revealing diaristic and confessional work has influenced the world of comics over the last four decades," according to Michael Kaminer and Sarah Lightman, co-curators of "Graphic Details." Among the showcased artists are several familiar to Lilith readers. Comics pioneer Diane Noomin, editor of the influential Twisted Sisters series, will be represented by original work, as will indie comics favorite Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Trina Robbins—creator of *It Ain't Me, Babe*, considered the first underground comic written and drawn solely by women—has appeared in Lilith several times since 1980. Kaminer wrote in the Forward: "While women have been writing frank confessional cartoons since the early 1970s, the context has changed. Personal problems have also supplanted gender politics as a dominant theme. But these young artists are just as ruthlessly honest, presenting their bodies as nakedly as their emotions." "Graphic Details" runs September 25, 2010 through February, 2011, at the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco. In March 2011, it will move to Toronto's Koffler Centre.

An ethical liberal who eats meat "carefully, with some inevitable guilt," asks:
Does the way we shop for food really make a difference?
Is political activism better for the environment in the long run than our individual small steps?

WHAT SHOULD I EAT?

by FRAN HAWTHORNE

ALTHOUGH LOUISE HEIT-RADWELL, A DANCE EDUCATOR in Brooklyn, New York, has been a vegetarian since college, it's a struggle to find protein sources for her daughter and son. "We used to eat a lot of tofu, but there are health issues because there's estrogen in it, and boys aren't supposed to have estrogen. And soy is overprocessed," she explained. Plus, her husband has high cholesterol, so they have to limit their consumption of dairy products. "Now I'm trying to eat more legumes and lentils. I have to find things my kids are willing to eat, because I'm not cooking three different meals." Heit-Radwell sighed. "I don't want to make my kids total nuts."

One day Jessica Philips (not her real name) found herself in Trader Joe's supermarket, staring at the egg cartons. "One carton said organic free-range. One carton said organic cage-free. Some just said cage-free with DHA" (an additive in chicken feed that's supposed to improve infant brain development and reduce the risk of heart disease in adults). Philips, a Los Angeles lawyer and mother of three, finally chose the free-range. "I'm a vegetarian," she said, "and it seemed to me that free-range meant a better treatment of animals." A few days later, checking her refrigerator, Philips realized that she had previously bought yet another carton of eggs, this one labeled cage-free and free-roaming. "There is only so much time you can spend on this," she groaned.

For Carie Carter, rabbi of the Park Slope Jewish Center in Brooklyn—the synagogue I belong to—food juggling begins with one clear requirement: "If it's not kosher, I'm not going to eat it." The next steps are more complex. "If it's kosher but animals are not treated humanely and workers are treated poorly, I'm not going to eat it." However, that's almost impossible to know unless conditions are so bad that they make news, as happened with the big kosher meatpacker Agriprocessors Inc. in 2008. On top of all those factors, Carter has been making more efforts to buy organic food since her daughter, Noa, was born in 2007. Organic produce is fairly easy to find, but kosher organic chicken is a problem. So Carter ends up getting nonorganic kosher chicken from a company that at least hasn't had any bad headlines.

Organic. Free-range. Cage-free. Barn-roaming. Free-roaming. Local. Natural. No preservatives. No antibiotics. No added hormones. No added steroids. No animal byproducts. Not genetically modified. Grass-fed. Vegetarian diet. Family-farmed. Certified humane-raised. Sustainable. Dolphin Safe. Fair-trade. Vegetarian. Vegan. Kosher. Low-calorie. Fat-free. Reduced-fat. Trans fat-free. Sugar-free. Caffeine-free. Gluten-free. Low-cholesterol. No-salt.

How sanitary are the conditions in which the food was grown, raised, processed, packed, and shipped? Where does the food come from? Is it in season? How many pounds of greenhouse gases did it take to grow, package, and transport the food? If it's from a developing country, were the local farmers compensated according to fair-trade criteria? How are the workers treated? Do they get proper training and safety equipment? Are they unionized? If animals are involved, how are they treated? What are they fed? What kind of fertilizer is used? If the product includes fish, is the species endangered? Are the fish likely to contain traces of mercury? Were any at-risk habitats damaged to grow the crops or raise the animals? Is the packaging recyclable?

"If it's kosher but animals are not treated humanely and workers are treated poorly, I'm not going to eat it."

Where did you buy your food: At a farmers market? Through a community-supported agriculture program? At a food co-op? At a health-food store? At a small, corner deli? At a bakery, a butcher shop, a fruit-and-vegetable stand, or some other specialty store? At a regional grocery chain? At a national-chain supermarket? At a discount warehouse or Big-Box superstore? Through online delivery? At a take-out restaurant? Did you grow it at home?

Do you have allergies? Are you vegetarian or vegan? Are you trying to lose weight? Are you on a special diet for medical reasons? Do you follow religious dietary laws? What culturally traditional foods did you eat growing up?

What tastes good? ■

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